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DARK SOULS II

Dark Souls fascinated and challenged like few games before it, and now a fresh chapter opens. In our feature starting on p62, we meet its creative team and penetrate the fog over its cruel new land

EXCLUSIVE: A NEW, BEAUTIFUL AND DEADLY WORLD AWAITS

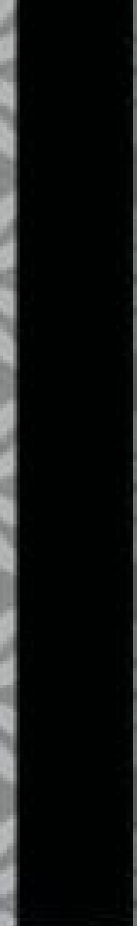
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THE EDGE AWARDS

THE BEST GAMES OF 2012

#249
JANUARY 2013



An eternal battle rages at the heart of Dark Souls II

On one side stands the stern force of challenge, the very soul of the *Souls* series. It has inspired thousands of fans to hack their way through two of the most demanding and rewarding games of an era, fans who expect at least the same test on the next go around. On the other side is the bright promise of accessibility. And why not? Why shouldn't FromSoftware and Namco Bandai open *Souls* up to a wider audience when it could otherwise be in danger of becoming stuck in a cult cul-de-sac?



There are many, after all, who have been put off by the series' habit of obscuring its best assets from all but the most committed. Entire systems, such as *Dark Souls*' covenants and *Demon's Souls*' World Tendency, remain mysteries to even reasonably experienced players – wouldn't it be a service to the games to help everyone understand them better? On the other hand, isn't the very nature of the *Souls* series about obfuscation and what it makes you work for? Aren't its greatest pleasures about the slow crawl of discovery in a world that refuses easy interpretation? What would the series lose if it was made more explicit?

As we find out in our feature starting on p62, the answers to these questions are in the hands of game directors new to the *Souls* series, **Tomohiro Shibuya** and Yui Tanimura, who have taken the reins from Hidetaka Miyazaki. Their descriptions of how they intend to mould *Dark Souls II* into a more approachable form seem reasonable. But Shibuya admits that their approach will be influenced by their individual characters. "I personally am the sort of person who likes to be more direct than subtle," he tells us. "[*Dark Souls II*] will be more straightforward and more understandable." We sympathise if that sort of statement concerns you, but at the same time, we can surely agree that we would all like to see *Dark Souls* attain as great a presence as *The Elder Scrolls*. How it gets there is a worthy matter for debate, but it's certainly a noble task.



games



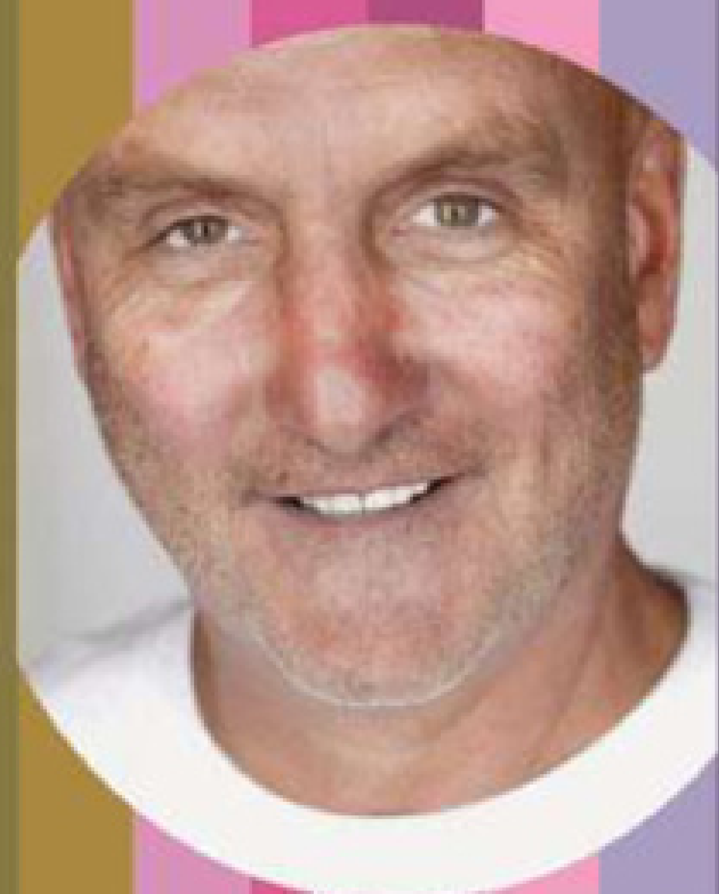
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WLEDGE

Nintendo's Wii U (1) is here just in time for Christmas, but it needs to make serious headway now if it is to stave off the impending arrival of its major rivals for the living room in 2013. We take a good hard look at the system on p14. Then Sony's family-friendly side is highlighted on p18, where we learn all about its new slate of augmented reality stories for Wonderbook (2), which kicked off with JK Rowling's Potter-themed *Book Of Spells* last month. Kids at heart might be more familiar with the days of playing their NES on an old CRT screen. When Hannes Hummel saw a vinyl toy with a TV for a head, it took him back to those days as well, and led him to make a toy with a head for games (3). Take a peek on p20. News and games aren't conventional bedfellows, but the year-long game jam of Game The News (4) aims to mesh the two, from the good news story of glowing road technology to the Syrian war. We delve into the sometimes controversial ideas of Tomas Rawlings and Auroch Digital on p22. Nolan Bushnell, Anthony Burch and Mark Pincus (again) all feature in our Soundbytes (5) on p24. Elsewhere, nerdcore songsmith and former software programmer Jonathan Coulton talks about iOS gaming; how having a song in the *Portal* credits has changed his life, if not his audience; and his love for Mario's most eccentric outing in My Favourite Game (6) on p26.



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Wii U is here

The next generation begins, but will a second screen be enough to save Nintendo?

An explanation of the struggle Wii U faces feels rather like repetition. After all, 3DS went through much the same process 18 months ago, tasked with repeating the phenomenal success of its predecessor in a market that's been rendered almost unrecognisable by Apple and Facebook, its audience cannibalised by social and mobile games.

The early woes of 3DS were ascribed to Nintendo's failure to clearly differentiate it from the staggeringly popular DS. Price was another concern, and Nintendo slashed the cost of the handheld within months of launch, taking the unusual step of selling hardware at a loss to gain a foothold in the market.

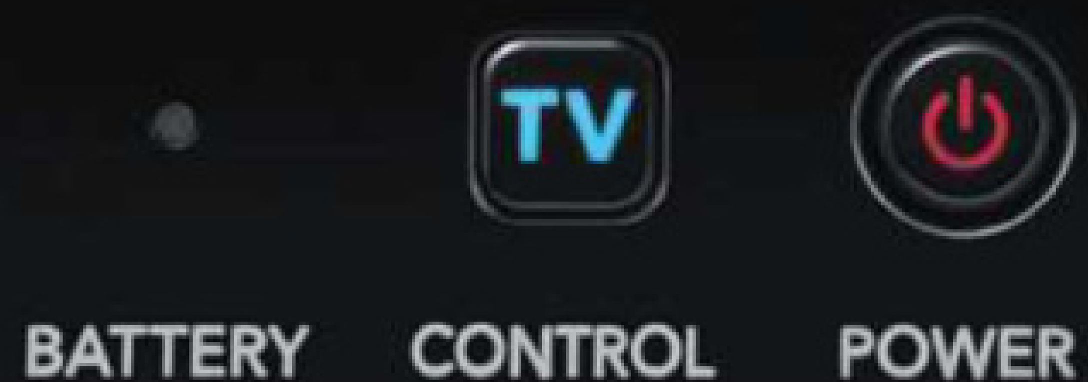
Wii U will also sell at a loss, despite a price tag that would suggest a console of far greater power, driven up by the cost of the GamePad controller and its built-in screen. In terms of raw horsepower, Wii U's broadly comparable with PS3 and 360, but it costs much more than those ageing systems, which are expected to be replaced in 2013. In short, Wii U probably has the best part of a year before its competitors arrive, so it needs a strong start.

WiiU

MIC HOME

And it feels like one, once you've got it set up (a cheery experience for those packing away a Wii at the same time, with the old power supply and sensor bar able to be reused) and you get to see Nintendo's vision of the next generation for the first time. In your lap, the GamePad shows a tile-based menu clearly modelled on that of 3DS, from which your games and apps are loaded, and settings configured. On the big screen is WaraWara Plaza, named after the Japanese word for 'bustling', and with good reason, with scores of Miis milling around under a floating ring of icons.





The GamePad sports two analogue sticks and sets of triggers, bringing it level with 360 and PS3. It also acts as a TV remote and a sensor bar for Wii Remotes

NEW LANGUAGE
Any device that runs apps needs some kind of consistent interface language – pinch to zoom on iOS devices, for instance, or PlayStation's Cross to accept and Circle to cancel (or the other way round in Japan). With two screens to manage, Nintendo has to standardise controls to ensure the entire family isn't sent back to square one by every new app – and it's off to a middling start. On the home screen, the web browser and the thirdparty Netflix app, a button on the top- or bottom-right of the GamePad display switches what's displayed on the big and small screens, but there's confusion elsewhere. YouTube's the worst culprit so far, suggesting Nintendo has to more rigorously control how thirdparties design apps.

To see WaraWara Plaza – and Wii U itself – at its best, you need an Internet connection. And this is where the problems begin. Initial claims from the US launch that the console's day-one system update was 5GB in size were way off the mark – it's barely a fifth of that – but it might as well have been, with the download taking the best part of an hour on our 30MB connection. Even getting to that point was difficult thanks to a widespread connectivity issue, which we solved only by manually configuring IP and DNS addresses. And once you've updated, expect every game and app to download and install an update of its own. If you're keeping one under the tree, you're advised to unwrap it early and get the turgid formalities out of the way lest you spend Christmas morning staring disconsolately at progress bars.

And you'll want to grab that update, because it adds features that, really, should have been available out of the box – not least backwards compatibility with Wii. This is awkwardly implemented by fully emulating the console's OS. Two new channels are added to the Wii menu, one to return to Wii U, and another to transfer games and save files from your old console – a lengthy process that's rendered charming by a procession of Pikmin ferrying your data across bridges, down stairs and along corridors. If only they did this for firmware updates. Wii games are upscaled, and look better on a HD panel by simple virtue of Wii U's HDMI connection.

TVii, a service that collates live, on-demand and subscription TV channels, launches next month in the US, but has only a vague 2013 launch date in Europe. In the meantime, there's Netflix, which at first looks no different to its console, browser or tablet incarnations, until you remember the GamePad. Tap an icon on the top-right of the GamePad display and the video instantly switches from the big screen to the one in your lap. It's a delight, too, with picture clarity belying the screen's 854x480 resolution. The YouTube app works in much the same way, but it's a fussy thing, requiring you to switch repeatedly between stylus and analogue stick. We preferred the Internet browser, which lets you send one page to the big screen while you load up another in a new tab on the GamePad.

Such apps are smart for the most part, but there's nothing that truly heralds the arrival of a new generation until you encounter Miiverse. Given Nintendo's obvious and long-standing aversion to online, it's not surprising that the company's first ever social network is the last thing we load up. Surely this will be a tightly walled garden, heavily moderated, hamstrung by Nintendo's family-friendly mantra? Not a bit of it. Miiverse takes elements from Xbox Live, Facebook and Twitter and builds on them in a service that's persistent throughout Wii U's operating system and does an awful lot to define the console, giving it purpose, meaning and bucketloads of charm.

> Unlike is replaced by Unyeah, a late but strong contender for 2012's word of the year

Miiverse is divided into game-specific communities, though you don't need to own or have played a game to discuss it. At any given time, messages might feature a request for purchasing advice, an inquiry as to whether it's playable on the GamePad screen, or a lengthy, chatty thread that has gone rather off-topic.

There will be screenshots, too, either from players showing off their skills or asking for help when they're stuck (tap the GamePad's Home button mid-game, load up Miiverse and you're two taps away from posting a screenshot of your current game). You can post messages using a virtual keyboard, or freehand using a direct successor to DS's PictoChat, making Miiverse a home for childish scrawls and surprisingly competent doodles. We assume there is some moderation behind the scenes – we're yet to see a single poorly inked phallus, for instance – but the few messages we posted appeared instantly.

Friend Codes are dead at last; instead, you send requests to Nintendo Network IDs through Miiverse. Like Xbox Live, there's a 100-friend limit, although that limit is offset by a follow system clearly borrowed from Twitter. Facebook's Like becomes Miiverse's Yeah; Unlike is replaced by Unyeah, a late but strong contender for 2012's word of the year. You'll likely find Miiverse quickly becoming part of your daily routine, not least because you can view it on the GamePad screen, checking updates over breakfast without switching on the TV.

When you do sit down in front of the big screen, Miiverse is there the second you switch the machine on, the factory-set Miis in WaraWara Plaza replaced by those of players from all over the world, ready to be selected to find out what they've been playing and what they have to say for themselves. It's there in games, too, from the Miis milling around in *Nintendo Land* to *New Super Mario Bros U*'s playful exhortations to post about a recently cleared level in a set number of words, perhaps, or in rhyme. It's a stream of relentless positivity, a welcome contrast to Xbox Live's rage-mail and drug-referencing gamertags. That may change as it spreads its wings from console to browsers and smartphones, but for the moment it's a delightful place to be, and the brightest suggestion of the Nintendo difference. While Microsoft bombards you with traditional advertising, Nintendo warms you to the charms of its products with sheer enthusiasm, a sense of community and playfulness. One **Edge** staffer spent 15 minutes having Miis run to keep up with the icons they're associated while he span them around with a press of the trigger.

Where Wii U falters is in its practicalities, not least loading times, including a lamentable 15-second wait to return to the home screen after quitting a game or app. The next firmware release will show whether Nintendo realises that updates aren't just for adding new features, but refining existing ones, too. Wii U's attitude to its



❶ The GamePad's home button lights up when a message is received.
❷ *Nintendo Land* is Wii U's *Wii Sports*, bundled with the Premium console.
❸ The Pro Controller is also bundled with the *ZombiU* Premium Pack.
❹ The main unit itself is similar to its predecessor but it's more rounded and twice as deep.
❺ Two feet for standing the system on its side.
❻ The cradle charges up the GamePad's battery.
❼ GamePad stand.
❽ Sensor bar.
❾ HDMI cable.
❿ GamePad AC adapter.
⓫ Console AC adapter

own controllers clearly needs improvement, with *New Super Mario Bros U*'s current incompatibility with the Wii U Pro Controller unacceptable when all the game requires is a D-pad and two buttons. If the launch-day ports are any guide, Wii U is not going to be a friendly home to quick and dirty conversions of multiplatform games. They'll need optimisation even before the next generation comes along and demands they be cut down, too.

Investors, analysts and armchair pundits all have their own take on the direction Nintendo should be taking, and few would have thought Wii U was the right one. Once again Nintendo has ignored them all and once again it's resulted in something unlike anything else on the market. It may sell terribly, of course; it may be shown up by the next Xbox or PlayStation. But Nintendo has innovated once again, making something that slots into family life as neatly as its predecessor. The difference this time is that it has the controls, online functionality, and, for now at least, the processing power to appeal to core gamers as well. A strong start, then, but the market will decide whether Wii U is a true next-generation console, or merely the stopgap its detractors say it is. ■

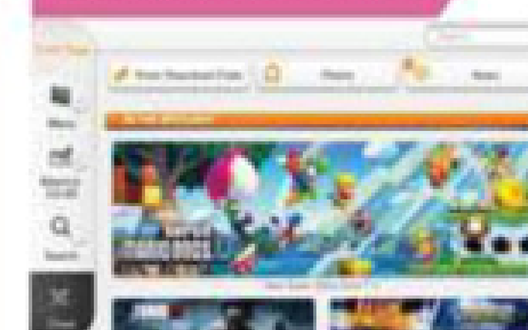




WaraWara Plaza (top). While European players will see Miiverse messages in multiple languages, everyone speaks the universal language of doodle. Apps are loaded from the GamePad screen (above), which clearly recalls the look and feel of 3DS's home screen

WII U ESHOP

The new online store has a few teething problems



The Wii U eShop is heavily modelled on its 3DS namesake, but don't be fooled: these are two distinct stores, with your balance in one not available in the other. The pricing of games is still a concern – four of the five indie games available at launch cost more than £10, and a download of *New Super Mario Bros U* will set you back a whopping £50. There's a demo of *FIFA 13* available, but it can only be played ten times before expiring, and purchases are locked to a single console, instead of the more sensible option of a portable account. Significant work, clearly, is still required to bring Wii U's marketplace in line with its closest rivals.

Spell binding

The magic behind Sony's new Wonderbook and its JK Rowling-penned debut story

Back in 2005, **Masami Kochi** sat down to imagine how to bring Sony's EyeToy technology to life on the then-nascent PlayStation 3, and started to draw a storyboard for a game she called *Wonderbook*. It showed a child sitting down on the floor with a book in front of him, and various games springing into 3D from the book's pages. He'd tilt the book to roll a hedgehog into holes, rotate it to help drive a car around a winding circuit, and hold out his hand to water plants in a garden. Eight years later, as creative director on Wonderbook, she finally helped launch it.

Book Of Spells, released last month, is the first in Sony's new series of story-based playthings for PS3, which faithfully take Kochi's original central idea of augmented reality games being built from the pages of a book, even down to the detail of turning them to bring up the next section. Based on Harry Potter, *Book Of Spells* is a charming and richly detailed package in which players learn spells from an ancient tome. It's in part a set of new JK Rowling-penned stories about wizards who invent magic and some cautionary tales of students misusing it, which is where *Book Of Spells* is at its strongest. It's also in part a Move-based action game, and *Book Of Spells* is a confident start for a new generation of augmented reality projects for Sony, following on from EyeToy back in 2003.

A veteran of Konami's arcade division, Kochi's design philosophy was set by the need for arcade games to be immediately playable by anyone, and the idea of focusing the game on something as universally familiar as a book played directly to it. "I liked the idea of a tactile book, something everyone knows already," Kochi says about her original concept, which, like the final product, uses machine-readable markers on its pages to tell PS3 about the book's orientation and which page is showing. "Also, books are all about stories."

Wonderbook's focus on storytelling over more traditional gameplay is part of a subtle tectonic shift in gaming towards the broader church of interactive entertainment, mirrored by Microsoft's recent TV-like *Sesame Street* and *Nat Geo* Kinect releases.

> "The fantasy world comes to you… There's something magical about that. You can't explain it with another word"

Book Of Spells itself was the result of a certain degree of serendipity. Three years ago, Sony started a partnership with official Harry Potter website Pottermore and called out for interesting projects that might fit with it. Rowling was shown the Wonderbook prototype, and one for Move, which was also floating around at the time. She already had the idea for some kind of spell book in her mind, Move was a shoe-in for a wand, and so the project quickly evolved.

Art design took the book as the game's centrepiece, researching the way old books were made. "With everything we do with Wonderbook, the book has to make sense as part of the experience," says game director **Dave Ranyard**. "We don't want it to feel tacked-on."

The next Wonderbook release will be *Diggs Nightcrawler*, which is billed by Kochi as the "first interactive story on Wonderbook," and styled on film noir. Developed with CGI production house Moonbot Studios, maker of Oscar-winning short The Fantastic Flying Books Of Mr Morris Lessmore, it follows the adventures of a detective bookworm as he chases the nefarious Shadowman in a world that's set in a library and populated by characters from nursery rhymes.





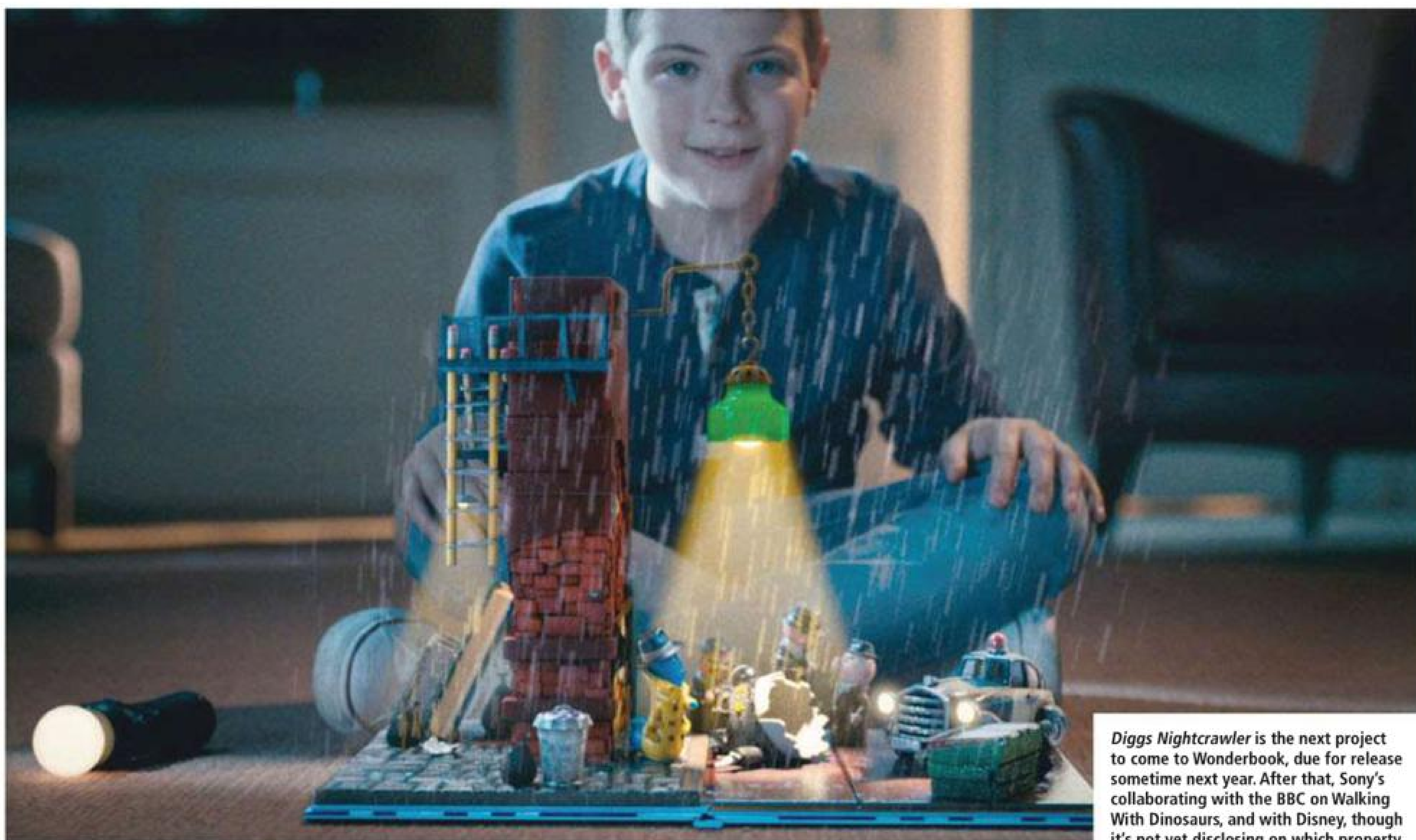
Wonderbook's creative director, Masami Kochi (top), who invented the concept, and game director Dave Ranyard



Contrasting with *Book* Of Spells' emphasis on Move, *Diggs* has players manipulating the book to solve its puzzles. Its 3D levels are built on the surface of the Wonderbook's pages, so you can move the book to see around the level. With lighting dynamically reacting to the book's orientation, you'll be tilting it to illuminate clues hidden in otherwise dark corners, or, in a sequence inspired by The Third Man's famous scene in which Calloway chases Harry Limes' shadow, turning it to see down corridors to find where Diggs' quarry has gone.

Sony approached Moonbot for the game: "We showed them Wonderbook and they saw things in Wonderbook that they couldn't do anywhere else," says Kochi. Given the hi-tech approach most new gaming peripherals take to introducing interactive experiences, it's refreshing to see creative opportunities arising from something as lo-fi as a book. "You have a book in your lap – you can feel it – and on the screen you can see yourself and interact with it," says Kochi. "The fantasy world comes to you, and you're there with the characters or spells. There's something magical about that. You can't explain it with another word."

"Videogames make amazing virtual worlds you can go and live in, and that's brilliant. But with augmented reality, it's bringing those things into our world and that feels really magical," explains Ranyard. "This book is almost the pathway between the two; it cements the relationship between your world and this fantasy world." ■



Diggs Nightcrawler is the next project to come to Wonderbook, due for release sometime next year. After that, Sony's collaborating with the BBC on Walking With Dinosaurs, and with Disney, though it's not yet disclosing on which property





ABOVE The Wonderbook itself features large blue markers that PS3 tracks and uses to identify pages. BELOW Kochi's original concept for Wonderbook, made seven years ago, is remarkably close to the final product, even down to sharing its name

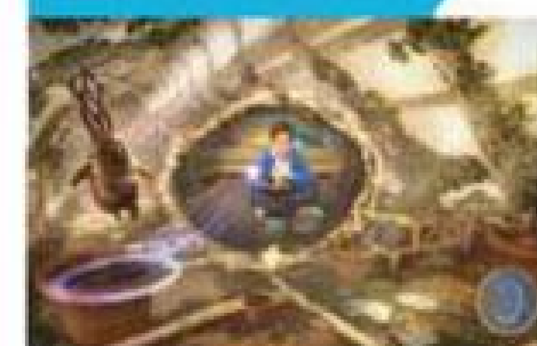






PLAYING WITH YARN

Wonderbook shows how game tech can tell stories



On the surface of it, there isn't much to connect the indie narrative experiment of *Dear Esther* and *Book Of Spells*, but they're both examples of how game technology can express a story without a game getting in the way. They also demonstrate how interaction can add to a sense of involvement in the story's world. For Ranyard and Koichi, the distinction between story and game is irrelevant, however. "For me, I just want to make entertainment, whatever that is," says Ranyard. "I never thought about it in that way," says Koichi. "It was more a matter of how intuitive and engaging it is."

HEAD CASE

The toy figure that plays games

When Cologne-based designer **Hannes Hummel** saw a vinyl toy figure with a TV for a head, he found himself remembering playing as a kid his Nintendo on an old CRT screen. And that led him, being the restless designer type, to the idea of making a vinyl toy with a head on which you can play games.

The Super Gigan Vinyl Toy features a stripped down Game Boy Advance SP that Hummel modded to connect with a NES controller. He'd have preferred to have used an original Game Boy, but it "was too big to put it inside a mini plastic TV without lots of soldering work. Also, the display of the AGS-101 model has a nice integrated backlight, so you can play it in the dark." The process was a challenge for his modding skills, though: "I screwed up three controllers and two GBAs until the prototype finally worked."

Most recently, Hummel has built an arcade cabinet that runs a hacked version of *Super Mario Bros*, which spells out, "We don't work – we play" in its level architecture as a typographical experiment. ■



Bulletin mode

The year-long developer jam that aims to turn news into games, Game The News

When **Tomas Rawlings** took part in his first game jam in October last year, he found it a revelation. It reinvigorated his love for making games, and showed him – a veteran of traditional game development at FluffyLogic, Hothouse Creations and Pivotal Games – how it's possible to build games not only very quickly, but also with quality production and original ideas.

It was the germ of Game The News, an ambitious project for his seven-person studio, Bristol-based Auroch Digital, to spend a year building tens, if not hundreds, of games that react to current affairs. Now in its third month, Game The News has been hosted on Huffington Post and Wired UK's websites, taking on varied stories and expressing them as light, but surprisingly polished, games.

The first, *Moral Kombat*, was based on the US election, in which you race the computer to type out quotes from the presidential candidates. After that came *Coconut Sunshine*, a strategy game that depicts the South Pacific nation of Tokelau's attempt to become the first to completely support itself with solar energy, balancing the need to serve its power requirements while selling energy to pay off its debts. It's far breezier than it is deep but, underpinned by real-world economics, it tells a real story.

The aspiration is to release a game a day. Many are five-minute distractions, but not all. Auroch's strategy game based on the civil war in Syria is an attempt to respond to weighty events. "The warning bell in your head says this isn't trivial – people are dying," says Rawlings. "Is it a step too far to make a game about it? Games cover current events normally in long retrospect. But as somebody for whom games are a natural language to explore something, I think they have something to offer complicated situations where outcomes are uncertain." Playing as the rebels, players expend resources on political and military matters. Without outside pressure to end the war, the game's systems mean it may run indefinitely, causing more deaths.



Tomas Rawlings is creative director at Auroch Digital; his background is in making strategy and war-based games



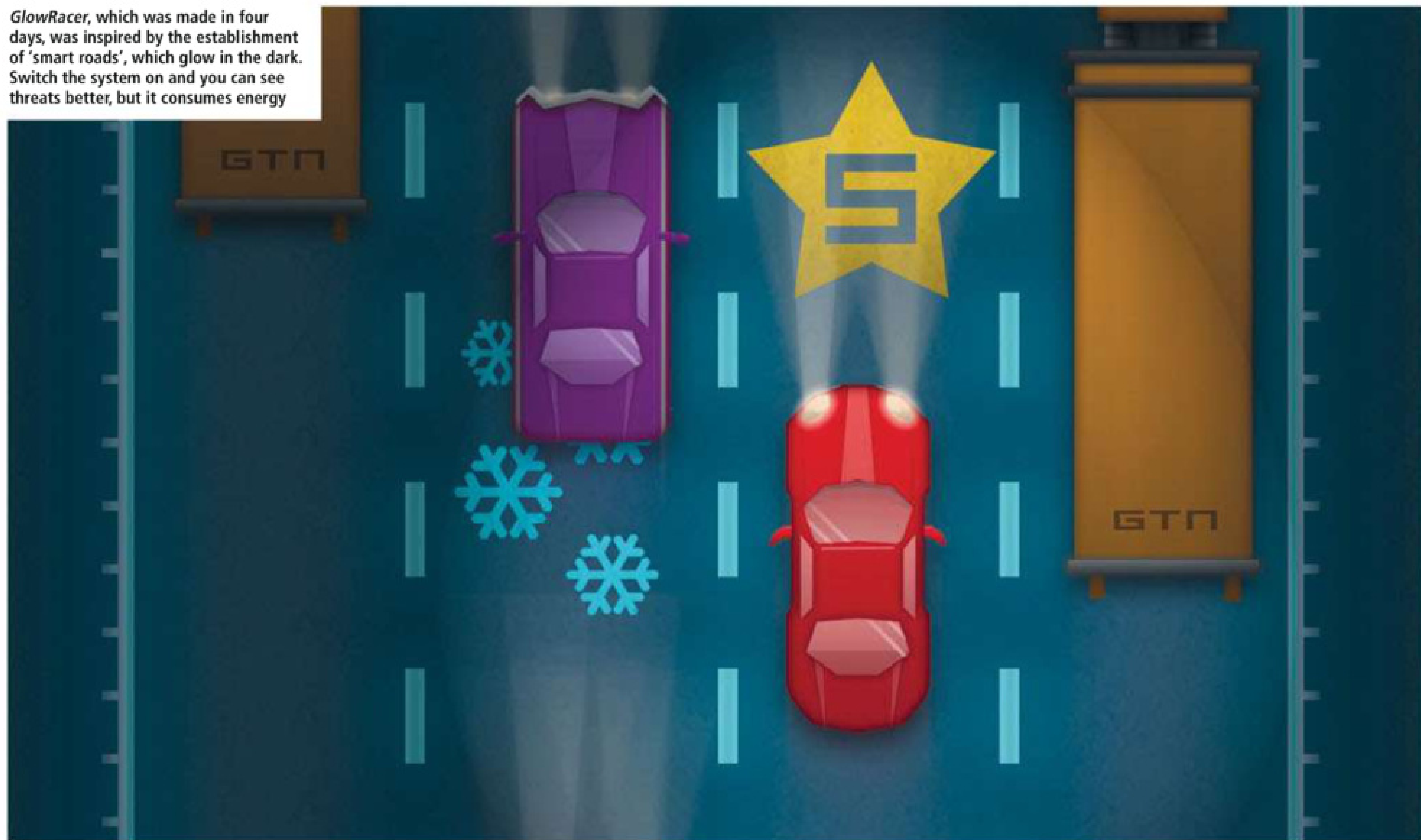
Rawlings is nervous about how the Syria game might be perceived. "It can't be tasteless," he says, acknowledging that strategy games' sober presentation tends to insulate them against accusations of crassness. The fact it's also presented on Auroch's Game The News website (www.gamethenews.net) with extensive links to source material gives it more weight, too. "I hope the player comes out from it more informed," he says. But he's uncomfortable with the idea that the project might be conflated with 'serious games', a term he feels implies that there aren't ways of interpreting situations other than by being serious. Game The News' philosophy (written on the studio's wall) is: "Short, playable experiences that make players laugh, smile or think." And its inspirations are as much The Onion as Al Jazeera. Rawlings' aim is engagement rather than information delivery. "It's about speaking the same language. I'm used to thinking, in so many other areas of my life, about the real world. Games are going to have a lot to offer."

> "Your head says this isn't trivial – people are dying. Is it a step too far to make a game about it?"

The project's also a testbed for interesting designs – the drag-and-drop element in *Freedom Of Information: The Game*, an otherwise slightly scrappy title about the process of getting freedom of information requests approved has informed a poker-based side project. As it happens, Rawlings is also working on a doctorate on the relationship between biological evolution and game design, which has led to the idea that making more games means more chances for ideas to mutate, and therefore greater chance of the good ones sticking.

Auroch primarily builds its games in GameMaker and exports them in HTML5, which can play on smartphone, tablet browsers and PCs. Since HTML5 isn't only cross-platform but also embeddable, the games can be found anywhere. The scale of the project, which is funded for its first few months, but has to be self-sustaining afterwards, brings many challenges. One is the fact that the headlong rush to maintain the pace of releasing games means it will be hard to publicise them. Rawlings feels that the important thing is to focus on marketing Game The News rather than the individual games, which are aided by a retro-pixel-arcade visual style that balances quality, distinctiveness and speed of production. But when Auroch releases longer-form projects, like the Syria game, it will need extra support, most likely advertising income.

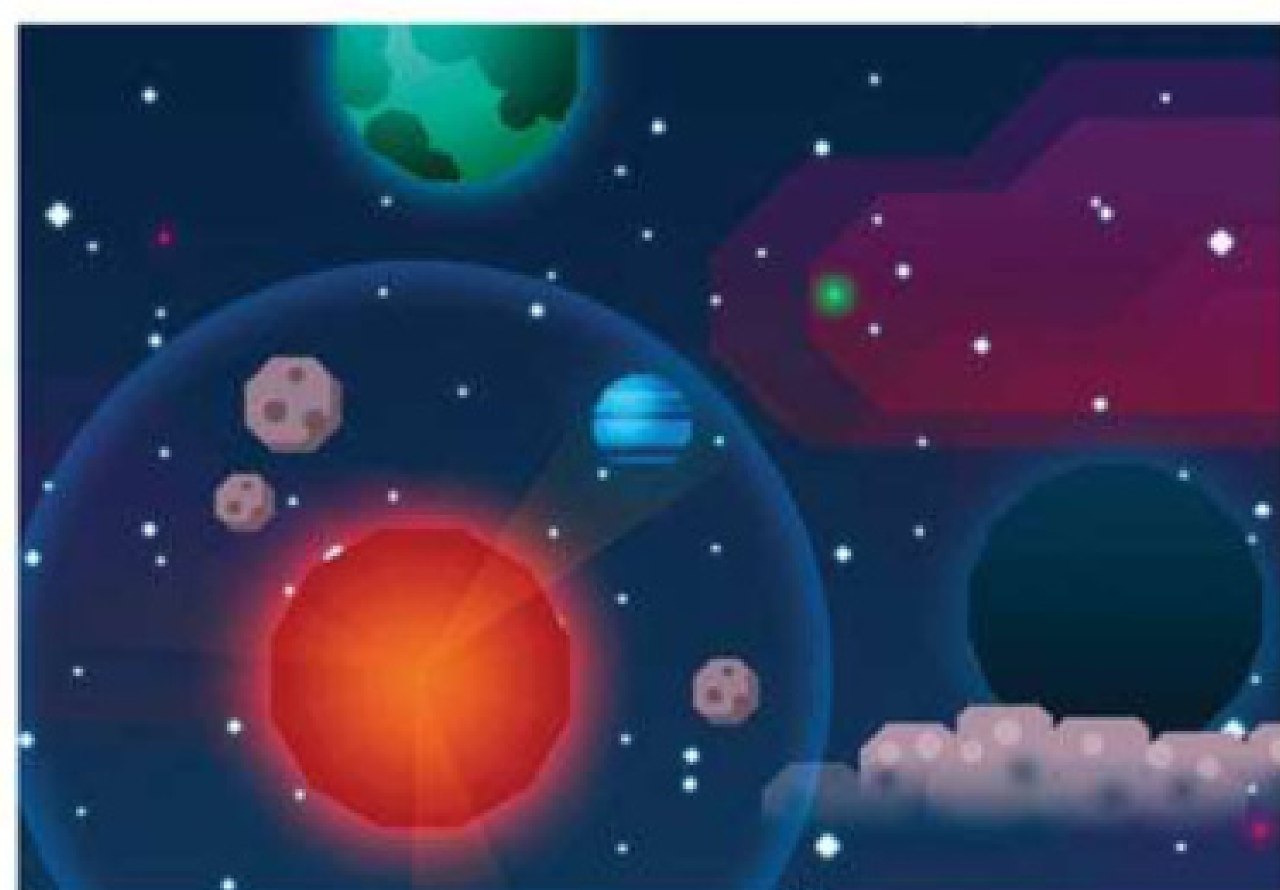
Whether Auroch can successfully navigate a transition between game development and journalism while maintaining a year-long game jam will be fascinating to watch, as will seeing whether there's an appetite to play the news. Rawlings hopes so, even if just to disprove a cliché. "There's a stereotype that gamers are disconnected from the world, but it's not the case. We want to marry technology with world events."



GlowRacer, which was made in four days, was inspired by the establishment of 'smart roads', which glow in the dark. Switch the system on and you can see threats better, but it consumes energy

RIGHT *Coconut Sunshine* tasks you with investing in solar power stations, which generate resources you can sell in order to pay off your debts. BELOW Auroch's Syria game, which had yet to be named at the time of going to press. It's styled very differently to the other GTN games, a decision that reflects its more serious inspiration and overall message. BOTTOM *CFBDSIR2149 Was Alone*, a game based on the discovery of the first nomad planet, and a reference to indie game *Thomas Was Alone*









BIOLOGY LESSON

Serious games aren't only about the news



Carrying on the theme of making games that engage with 'serious' subjects, Auroch Digital has also been working with the Wellcome Trust in its attempts to encourage developers to reflect biological science in their games. The studio hosted a 24-hour game jam during the ExPlay conference last month based on the theme of 'deception'. Laudably, the project was less about presenting fusty scientific principles and more about fun. The winner was *HIVe* (pictured) by team Pi=3, in which one player must infect as many cells as possible before being caught by the anti-retroviral player.

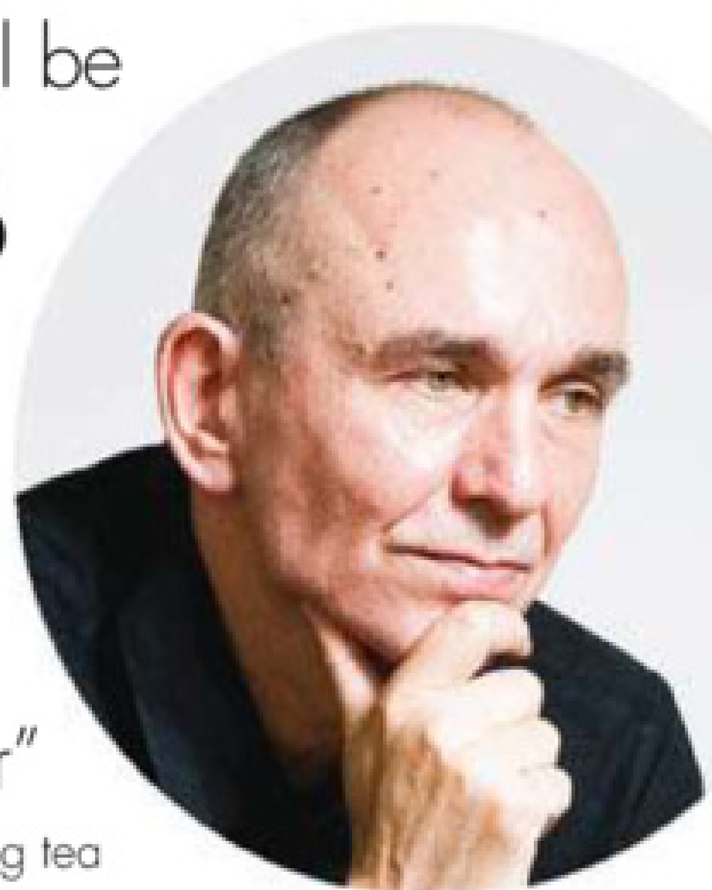
Soundbytes

Game commentary in snack-sized mouthfuls



"I actually am baffled by it. **I don't think it's going to be a big success...** It feels like the end of an era to me"

Atari founder **Nolan Bushnell** on Wii U



"I think I will be doing games until the day I die. I can't see that, at this rate, the way I'm burning through my life… I don't see that I'll be alive much longer"

Game vet **Peter Molyneux** needs a big mug of strong tea



"Our company defines innovation differently than other companies. We define innovation differently than the whole game industry does"

Zynga CEO **Mark Pincus**. Again



"Michael Bay is like a small kitten pawing at the massive yarn ball that is explosions, barely understanding its true depth and the potential it carries"

Borderlands 2's Mister Torgue, AKA Gearbox Software's **Anthony Burch**

ARCADE WATCH

Keeping an eye on the coin-op gaming scene



Game Winter X Games: SnoCross
Developer Raw Thrills

Defender, *Robotron*, *NARC*, *Smash TV* – *Winter X Games: SnoCross*? Industry veteran Eugene Jarvis's latest, an arcade cabinet that aims to recreate the pant-wetting thrills of snowmobile racing may not be what you'd expect to come next on his CV (although he has been quietly overseeing arcade racers, including the *Cruis'n* series, for a long time now). But in its own way, it's as innovative as any of those titles and in an area common to them all: the high score.

The cabinet pioneers a global approach to leaderboards that encourages players to snap a pic of their record run by smartphone. A code embedded in the shot then sends it to an online hub where Facebook and Twitter accounts can broadcast your achievement to the community, along with the exact location of your moment of glory.

Officially endorsed by ESPN, the game's locations are all US-centric – rendered in meticulous detail but also conveying an epic sweep of dramatic scale. They're a perfect balance of design flair and faithful recreation, much like the cabinet's centrepiece. Just don't expect any Snowdon showdowns.



My favourite game
Jonathan Coulton

The nerdcore songsmith discuses how Portal changed his life, iOS gaming and Mario's most eccentric outing

Jonathan Coulton has a big, booming laugh, which he uses often and with relish. The New England programmer-turned-songwriter became something of a household name in gaming circles when he wrote *Portal*'s quirky end-credits theme, Still Alive. Intelligent and playful, we ask him to divulge on life after GlaDOS.

What were your formative experiences with videogames?
I have loved computer-based games as long as they've existed. I remember my dad bringing home the first home version of *Pong* that was available. It hooked up to your television by screws on the back of your TV. That was really the beginning of it. When I was a kid, one of the things my dad and I did together was go out to arcades. Every weekend, we'd go to an arcade together, we'd get $10 in quarters and we'd play for hours.

Do you think your love of playing music arose from the same impulses that made you fond of games?
Yeah, I would say so. Definitely for me there has always been a strong connection between computers and music. I'm a songwriter, and I used to be a software developer; I'm a gamer and an instrument player. And all of these things spring from the same place in my brain. On the performance side, playing an instrument and manipulating a character in a game with a controller is a similar kind of experience, because you have this hand-eye coordination thing where, once you get good at it, the controller disappears and you feel like you are moving the character with your mind. And that's sort of what happens, optimally, when playing an instrument – you forget about the guitar, you don't think about it any more. And it's the same thing [with] programming computers and writing songs. It's a kind of puzzle solving; at least I think of it that way.

LAB NOTES
Coulton quit his software programming job in 2005 to pursue music full time. He'd been amassing a loyal following by releasing his offbeat pop songs online and letting fans listen for free, which provided a platform to make a living from his music despite not being signed to a record label. He has also teamed up with comedian and former Yale classmate John Hodgman as music director for the Little Gray Books lectures. His big break came when he was asked to write a song for *Portal*'s end credits.



How different was your experience as a performer before and after Still Alive?
In terms of the demographics of my audience, it wasn't that big a change for me. Because I had come up as a geeky musician with geeky subject matter and a geeky crowd. So there were already, let's just say, many top hats, capes and system administrator security badges in my crowd before this happened. That said, the extent of the exposure that this song had was vast, and certainly when that song hit, for many people who had never heard of me, I became 'the guy who had written the *Portal* song'.

> "Every weekend, we'd go to an arcade together, we'd get $10 in quarters and we'd play for hours"

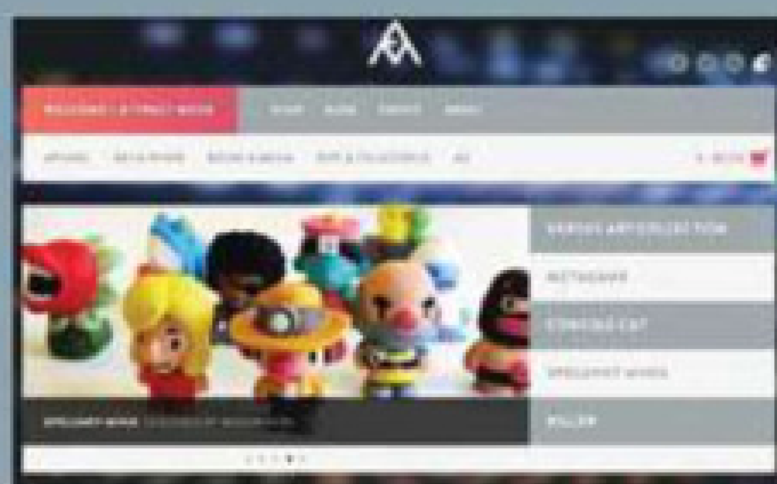
You built a sustainable career using the Internet. Are there any lessons that might be helpful to indie designers?
I don't know if my methods from 2005 still apply to the world today. I will say that the thing I've learned is that it's very important to make something that is good. That sounds trite, but the old system supported people making garbage and getting by on marketing and placement. And garbage is not going to sell any more, because people have garbage detectors that are a lot more powerful than they used to be. People are very good at deciding what things they like, so the stuff you make has to be great, and it has to be honest, and it has to resonate with people. And you have to believe in it and love it yourself.

What games are you drawn to now?
I have two kids – seven and four – and I don't have time to do anything any more. The list of things you need to do grows incredibly long when you have kids, so whereas I used to be able to sit down in front of the Xbox with *Halo 2* and play for 10 hours until two in the morning, I can't do that any more. So my gaming interests have shifted [by] necessity to the smaller, lower-impact games. Quite honestly, it's all about iOS gaming for me now. I'm really enjoying a game called *Spirit*, which is basically an old-style arcade game.

OK, your favourite game, sir?
It would have to be *Super Mario Bros 2*, which I believe was made to be a completely different kind of game and then reskinned to be a *Super Mario Bros* game. But it was so weird, so strange... I have really fond memories of playing that game and discovering all the bizarre new ways of moving around the world. Being able to jump on an egg that was flying through the air and ride it – it was insane. Of the four playable characters, I went with the princess, because she could jump and hover. That game gets the nostalgia vote, for sure. ■

Coulton's songs Still Alive and Want You Gone appear on the recently released 4-CD collection Portal 2: Songs to Test By (Collector's Edition), which also comes with an exclusive mini-comic about Aperture Science

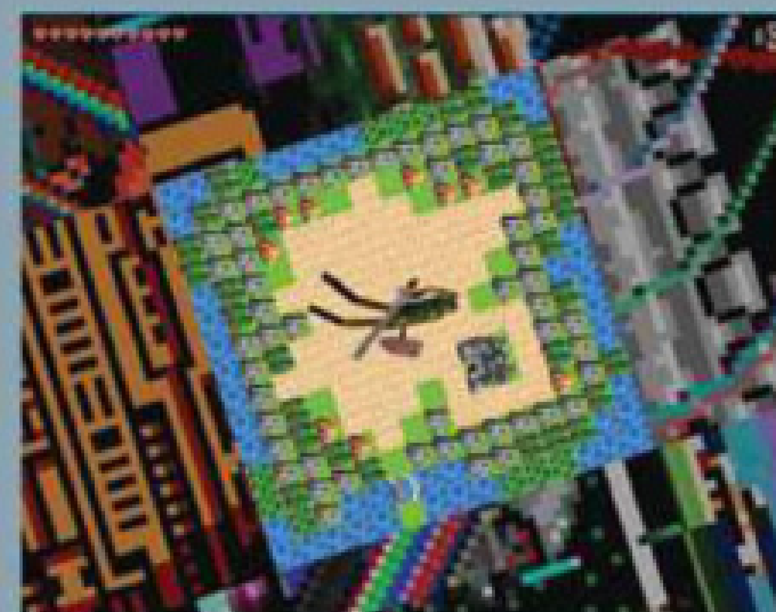
WEBSITE
Attract Mode
www.bit.ly/Wa5GJ
Attract Mode launched in 2009 as a blog and videogame culture shop where you could buy cool, artsy game-related T-shirts and posters. You can still find both of these things on its website, but the nature of the operation has changed into a proper interdisciplinary collective, pulling indie game developers, journalists, filmmakers, designers and artists into orbit with one another. Founding member Adam Robezzoli is merging this community into the LA Game Space initiative, which should further spur collaboration within LA's indie gaming circles. The beauty of the Attract Mode site is that it lets us spy on what's happening there, seeding ideas on how to export the same kind of creative excitement and videogame community to other pockets of the globe.





VIDEO
Iwata Wii U unboxing
www.bit.ly/TKvvvr
Watching the president of a large corporation jump on the unboxing video bandwagon ought to be as cringe-inducing as hearing Bill Gates say 'That's how I roll' (he hasn't, as far as we know). But when it's the cheerily earnest Satoru Iwata, somehow our cringe reflexes falter and give way to a smile. It's too good to be believed. The synthetic horn fanfare soundtrack. The formal bow as he stands behind the box. The crisp business suit, like a kid who's been forced to dress up before he can open his presents on Christmas morning. Satoru, wii love u.

WEB GAME
Skrillex Quest
www.bit.ly/StSWXU
The kinship between making electronic music and games is obvious. Both involve toys with lots of buttons and knobs begging to be messed with. The advergame Jason Oda created for Skrillex makes the link even more explicit. His ten-minute Flash effort is a love letter to the 8bit *Legend Of Zelda*, which coincidentally launched in the west the same year that Sonny 'Skrillex' Moore was born. The pixel art design borrows liberally from *Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP*, but the gameplay has a more seamless action feel, as you run about slashing the glitchy artefacts plaguing the world. Basing it on a well-known title allows for some amusing subversions of expectations, such as a fairy pond where you request a health top-up, only to be told that you don't have health insurance.



THIS MONTH ON EDGE

An anthology of tidbits that piqued our attention during the production of **E**249

KILLING IS HARMLESS
www.stolenprojects.com
Spec Ops: The Line isn't the most exceptional shooter ever released. In fact, in gameplay terms, it's fairly pedestrian. But as author Brendan Keogh discovered, a game doesn't have to be incredible to make an incredible statement. What began as a long-form essay took on a life of its own. As Keogh dug into the subversive anti-war themes in the game, he kept unearthing more facets that warranted discussion. Killing Is Harmless is a 50,000-word close reading of *Spec Ops: The Line*. Keogh examines what's happening around him like an embedded war reporter, pondering the cultural significance of virtual violence with unrivalled depth and clarity of insight.



continue

THQ's bundle
What happens when a humbled publisher needs to make a bundle

LA Game Space
This indie mecca is getting its mosque. Prayers are answered!

#1ReasonMentors
Developers volunteer mentorship to female devs. Plz RT!

MoMA
Are games art? NYC's Museum Of Modern Art appears to think so

quit

Day one patch
Unboxing Wii U on Christmas Day and playing by Boxing Day

Uplay
Except when you don't play, because its servers have crapped out

Sexism
#1ReasonWhy industry confessions make Mad Men seem progressive

Are games art?
A 462-word opinion piece by a non-player riles up another storm

TWEETS
Is there any caption more pathetic than "cinematic footage: not actual gameplay"?
Stephen Fry @stephenfry
British actor, writer and 'Lord of Dance'

Guess it's that time again, when EA puts their entire mobile catalog on sale & grinds purchases of every other iOS game ever to a halt.
Nathan Vella @Capy_Nathan
Co-founder and president, Capy Games

I'm really getting into this *Halo* game. I'm not sure why, but it could be the little hand-held stripper they give you at the start.
Tim Schafer @TimOfLegend
President/CEO, Double Fine Productions

PLEASE LIST SOME RECENT GAMES THAT DON'T FEEL LIKE GOING TO WORK AT A NEW, BORING JOB FOR 40 HRS A WEEK
Bryan Lee O'Malley @radiomaru
Creator, Scott Pilgrim Vs the World



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DISPATCHES JANUARY

Within Dispatches this issue, Dialogue sees **Edge** readers discuss gender under-representation in gaming and the cost of free-to-play. You also give your views on combining Kinect and Oculus Rift for full immersion, and why games should drop bloody bad storytelling. Then, in Perspective, **Steven Poole** considers an outsider's perspective on gaming's death fetish, **Leigh Alexander** reports on a chat with Peter Molyneux and the growing cult of the celebrity developer, and **Brian Howe** blows the dust off the history of the retro remake.



www.edge-online.com
Discuss gaming topics with fellow **Edge** readers



Issue 248

Dialogue



Send your views to edge@futurenet.com, using 'Dialogue' as the subject. Our letter of the month wins a 3DS

Gender split

I write in response to **E**248's story on the videogame industry's off-balance gender split. This is something that, as a native of an EU country, makes me nervous. I don't think many people would dispute that more women in development would probably result in more interesting games being made. But we must bear in mind EU legislation: employers cannot discriminate against workers either negatively or positively.

While I don't think **Edge** was suggesting videogame companies should appoint women to vacant positions instead of male candidates who are better qualified, I must object to Renaud Charpentier's suggestion that we lose women because we do not give them 'decision access' quickly enough. I work in game development, but you don't need to be in this profession to realise that's a problem affecting not just women, but men too. People in all industries have to start at the bottom, work hard and prove themselves worthy of moving up the ladder. The only way for us to fix this longstanding gender imbalance is to avoid any special treatment one way or the other.

I worry, though, that this is a vicious circle. This industry has had a problem with the way it portrays women for as long as I can remember. This, I assume, is because of the overwhelmingly male teams that produce these games. Which of these do we fix first? Until we work that out, I worry that this will remain a male-dominated pastime, incapable of portraying strong female characters without overtly sexualising them.
Matthias Egger

Whether legal or not, working towards an industry comprising an equal gender mix shouldn't be the result of positive discrimination. It's a matter of encouraging more women to develop a passion for making videogames. But part of the responsibility for that lies with the existing industry portraying itself as a place in which such women would want to work.

Paying the price

In the past 18 months it has been said time and again that the subscription model is dying, and free-to-play is ready to take its place. For a while it certainly seemed that way, but I wonder if the tide is now turning? Zynga is quickly finding out what happens when you treat your customers as faceless sacks of meat and cash. I read on your website about the developer of *Punch Quest*, which turned its app from free to paid because its design was too generous. It wasn't cynical enough, it didn't nag or force people to pay, so it failed. Perhaps that's why I liked it much more than most free games.

World Of Warcraft subscriber numbers actually rose in the last three months. *Mists Of Pandaria* helped, sure, but I think it says a lot that *WOW* is hanging in there. Rumours of its death continue to be greatly exaggerated. Of course, some MMOGs are failing, but is that the model, or the game? I hear that *The Old Republic* is still a stinker even after they made it free.

And a word, too, about PlayStation Plus. Little has been said in the press about how successfully this service has been revamped – understandably, as you guys get games for free anyway – but for £40 a year I am getting to play some great PS3 games I would otherwise never have bothered with, and now I'm getting some on Vita, too. I feel like free is the way to go if all you want is numbers – if you measure success in terms of daily active users, and put stock in how many meaningless vanity items you can sell to the easily led. But I believe there will always be a place – and a price – for quality.
Leigh Francis

We've long held the sneaking suspicion that the biggest problem about free-to-play is that it contains the term 'free'. Because, clearly, it's not.

Inspiration

It's not just women who're put off by this industry, y'know. I've been an avid gamer for more decades than I care to admit. I've explored numerous universes, killed a large proportion of their inhabitants and marvelled, then forgiven – for reasons of ludic-sympathy – their poor ability to deliver lines in a convincing fashion. And I've marvelled at their unconvincing fashion, too.

But it all came to a head when Bungie's *Destiny* concept artwork leaked. Now, I wasn't sat here expecting a curve ball, but I honestly don't think I can enter another war-torn future dystopia, let my hands and fingers settle into their familiar positions on yet another FPS/thirdperson control scheme and attempt to convince yet another non-gaming friend – girl or boy – that they should really get onboard.

Bungie's concept work, and Star Wars-baiting plot, is so depressingly familiar, and so high-profile, that it drowns out the more reasonable side of me – the side that's delighted by the existence of games like *Thirty Flights Of Loving*, *Journey* and *The Walking Dead*. There's plenty of imagination in this industry, sure, but it all seems to be concentrated away from the loud, public-facing wall of noise that represents this culture to the rest of the world. I'm getting increasingly close to stepping beyond it.
Jason Brown

The issue of judging a game so soon aside, isn't the problem a matter of public taste?

Democratic design

I write in regards to Brian Howe's You're Playing It Wrong (**E**248). He wrote about

the possibilities of the Oculus Rift, and at the end he made a comment that, despite all the technological advancements, it will mostly likely only be used for the "same old gun violence". As a PC gamer, it's not alien to me to have the bleeding edge of technology completely ignored by big-name developers and publishers because the console gaming market is much more lucrative and easier to develop for; which in turn made me question the current state of the gaming industry. For instance, with the new *Grand Theft Auto V*, I wasn't shocked to learn it's primarily being developed for consoles. Why are Rockstar using old technology to produce an exact copy of something it did five years ago, but with a different story? With new technology there are infinite possibilities!

The first thing that came to my mind when I heard of the Oculus Rift was Kinect. What if someone combined the two? Can you imagine playing a game without pressing buttons or staring at screen, but using your head and body to move your avatar? To be immersed visually through the Oculus Rift visor, audibly through headphones and kinetically through Kinect. Obviously, movements would mostly be restricted to on the spot. There would be nothing worse than being brought screaming out of a game because you attempted a leap of faith in *Assassin's Creed* and ended up breaking some bones. Such a radical idea would never be taken on by the big names, at least not with creative dignity – you only need look at the Kinect gaming library to know what I mean. I feel the answer lies with independent developers; they don't need to convince a publisher to part with their money, or to convince them that this game will appeal to the widest market. They need to convince the public, that what they want to develop is something fresh and worth funding. Chris Roberts' *Star Citizen*, for example – if you haven't heard of it then you've been probably living under a rock – garnered $6 million, even though the project is not very radical. The game was crowd-funded; a lot of people used their hard-earned cash to fund the project because they liked the idea. If the studio fails then they're not letting a publisher with a bank loan down, they're letting hundreds if not thousands of people down. Surely that in itself instils a sense of consideration and ownership that the big names don't have? Are we witnessing the birth of an industry run democratically, where gamers choose what games are developed, where developers care for their creations? I, for one, hope this is a turning point for the gaming industry.
Richard Tito

Yes, it's certainly a turning point, and one for the better. Have a 3DS to celebrate.

Richard Tito wasn't horrified to learn *GTAV* is being developed primarily for consoles, but he hope indies will embrace new tech



Environmental storytelling

I have a suggestion for gaming's Room 101, but before it gets pushed in there, many developers might be tempted to injure themselves and write something downbeat about it in blood, all over the walls. Sorry, did that sound dramatic? They can look in the scrawled-on mirror for who's to blame, because this is exactly the thing I'm talking about. **E**248 gave preview space to *Dead Space 3*, one of many games in a long line to take a common shortcut in creating ambience and providing exposition: "ALL is LOST!" the panelling reads. The suggestion is that at the peak of panic or despair, a foremost thought of the human mind is to find the nearest puddle of type AB or O negative and leave a rather depressing message written on the surroundings. This, despite the situation clearly being so grim that they can't conceive how anyone would survive to ever read it. This device is no smarter than the convenient audio logs left scattered by all those clumsy archivists, dropped just before the whole population was wiped out and you were parachuted in to save the day. Now that technology is moving on yet again, is there no way that we can move storytelling on with it – or is this death rattle graffiti really the best we can do?
Lee Hyde

"Developers [should] injure themselves and write something in blood all over the walls"

We've also wondered who on earth would write all those messages in times of such peril. Perhaps *Left 4 Dead* did it best by restricting them to its safe rooms, and investing a little more imagination in them.

ONLINE OFFLINE

Your responses to topics on our website at www.edge-online.com

The number of women working in the game industry is at its lowest in a decade – what's going wrong?
This is sad, sad news, being a female in the videogame industry myself, and the only female in the office, haha.
Melissa Terry, Facebook

I'm studying Computer Games Technology at the moment, and I'm the only girl in my class of 60 odd, so I know where they're coming from!
Zoë Sams, Facebook

It's sad because any creative industry benefits from a larger diversity of perspectives – as the article points out the games industry is failing to attract anywhere near the amount of women that other creative industries do. I am not advocating positive discrimination and I don't think this article is either, but I wholeheartedly agree with the premise that the industry needs to attract more women.
David Sams, Facebook

Edge republishes its original *Super Mario All-Stars* review
It's like the *Orange Box* of *Mario* games!
Paul Arnold, Facebook

"There's one bad thing about it: if the best cart around is a compilation of old 8bit games, it doesn't say much for the standard of new games, does it?" Good to see that bitching about the state of the industry, and saying how much better games USED to be was still alive and well back in 1993.
Pete Baines, Facebook



marshdavies.com



STEVEN POOLE

Trigger Happy

Will Self's outsider's view of gaming is thought-provoking, despite the common misconceptions

Every so often, a celebrated littérateur opines on the subject of videogames, having just discovered or rediscovered them. A few years ago, novelist John Lanchester asked of the medium: "Is it art?" (His answer: maybe, one day.) Now Will Self has written an essay for the London Review Of Books about how his sons are obsessed with games, and – in a lovely flight of metacritical fancy – wondering what the literary theorist Northrop Frye would have made of it all.

Some of the cognoscenti might feel inclined to dismiss nonspecialist analysis, especially if it contains (as Self's does) a few errors. But if we want games to lose their association with spotty boys, they are going to be part of a wider cultural conversation. And sometimes outsiders see things that we don't.

Self, it turns out, has a keen eye for games' mythico-narrative scenarios. Describing his 15-year-old son's epic gaming sessions in his "man-cave", he comments: "I've always been happiest about this when the kill zone is decked out in the furniture of established Nordic folklore – dragons, frost giants, axe-wielding berserkers, etc – rather than the inchoate mythology [...] of that all-time gore-rest *Call Of Duty*". What he finds distasteful in *COD* is *Blops*'s Nazi-zombies mode. His son and friends say that since the enemies are both zombies and Nazis, there can be no guilt about gunning them down. I've always assumed the same thing: their cartoonish double-down evil makes the Nazi zombies less morally troubling assault-rifle fodder than the nameless Arabs or Russians one is encouraged to bullet-riddle or torture in such games' main campaigns.

But Self problematises this easy defence: "Even perpetrating the second death of a zombie diminishes the game-player," he insists, "because it necessarily exposes him to all the grotesque nonsense the game's writers have cooked up out of Third Reich horrors – the concentration camps, Mengele, the Mittelbau-Dora rocket factories and so forth – and then spiced with anachronistic steam punk conceits." OK, so steampunk conceits are always anachronistic, but perhaps he's right about the glib appropriation of the structures and machinery of Hitlerian genocide for mere fetishised set dressing to a shooting gallery.

Perhaps Self's right about the appropriation of the machinery of genocide for mere set dressing

Self's point, I assume, is not that you shouldn't make entertainment out of the Nazis – laughing at them is one way to show the appropriate scorn. Quentin Tarantino demonstrated this in Inglourious Basterds, a film that, I take it, aimed to complete and destroy the Holocaust movie genre by making it henceforth impossible to craft earnestly syrupy Nazi-based dramas that congratulated themselves on their righteous sympathy and comfortably distanced moral superiority. But the decontextualised exploitation of Nazi symbolism purely for its allegedly edgy (but morbidly clichéd) decorative glamour is – as when a Formula 1 boss enjoys a "Nazi-themed orgy", or a princeling sports a swastika to a fancy-dress party – just dismayingly crass.

Elsewhere, Self's essay muses on the theme of predation, endorsing the argument of Paul Trout that "our earliest mythologies" are based "in the experience not of being hunters, but of being hunted" by jawed megafauna such as the sabre-toothed tiger. He finds this a refreshing counter to the modern shooter that tells its customers they are alpha predators. But videogames have long played precisely on a tense alternation between being predated upon and doing the predating. (As Self could have noticed even in *Pac-Man*.) If we were only prey in games, they would be too depressing a phantasmagorical allegory of real life, since most of us are fundamentally prey to the rapacious dance of global capital, to crypto-psychopathic bosses, to barbarous bureaucracy. That's why we enjoy the predator fantasies of videogames, as well as why (or so Adam Kotsko argues in Why We Love Sociopaths) we enjoy TV series whose heroes are antisocial predators, such as Dexter and Breaking Bad.

The main limitation of Self's analysis is that all the games he discusses – *Blops*, *Skyrim*, *WOW* – involve a lot of killing, so he is driven to see games in general as a globe-rimming überfiesta of death-porn. We know that's not the case, but that's all he's seen his sons play; and this widely shared misapprehension is hardly mysterious when the games that are the most expensively advertised, and so likely to impinge on a non-gamer's consciousness, are indeed the mega-murder simulators. (My local Pizza Hut is offering a *Halo 4* stuffed-crust pizza. I dread to think what it's stuffed with.)

But one can wish that Self had witnessed something odder and less predatory. I would have lent him the game that has given me the happiest and least homicidal pleasure this month, *Frederic: Resurrection Of Music*, explaining gently that you play the composer Frédéric Chopin, risen from the grave in 21st century Paris and obliged to defeat a series of modern musicians in sonic duels by tapping the keys of a virtual piano in time to glorious techno or reggae remixes of famous Chopin tunes. Surely even Northrop Frye would have been delighted with that.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at www.stevenpoole.net



marshdavies.com



LEIGH ALEXANDER

Level Head

Personalities are slowly becoming a bigger part of the industry and that just might be good for it

Recently, I interviewed Peter Molyneux about his new iOS game, *Curiosity*. He describes it as little short of miraculous, a global experiment that supposedly contains a life-changing secret at its heart. Everyone else describes it as 'some cube thing', all but certain to mark another occasion when the quirky creator over-promises and under-delivers.

Molyneux's reputation as a big dreamer suffering from an excess of ambition has won him no shortage of controversy – and scepticism. Even as someone who likes big dreamers, I had to admit *Curiosity*'s cube thing seemed a little perplexing.

But there's something about speaking to the man that makes you want to believe. He described to me his rush flight back to England in response to *Curiosity*'s App Store launch – where he pressed his phone to the window, desperate for a signal, feeling it would be "worth it" if he caused the flight to crash.

His sense of wonder that so many people had gathered to tap at his mysterious cube was palpable. Peter Molyneux is a man that wants to find the answers to the questions his imagination poses; he wants to know whether a sense of mystery and community is enough to drive hundreds of thousands of people to pursue an experience together. His fascination is tangible, electric, inspiring.

This, I thought, is why people pay attention to Molyneux, why his persona inspires a parody Twitter account and an elaborate profile piece in Wired. The man is inseparable from the ethos of his work, and one can't take interest in one without the other.

This industry is starved for personality, and some don't like the idea of authorship at all – games are the product of a team environment, it's the player that should take the lead in crafting the experience, and so on. That's why such figures can be so contentious: it's rare that fans get the opportunity to personify games, or to correlate them with a single voice.

Yet obviously people want to, hence the rush to crown figureheads, to attribute games or companies to someone. That's arguably natural: every medium has recognisable voices and faces, and it's really only games that still struggle with how to negotiate celebrity and creatorship on an individual level. It's controversial; people like Molyneux, Hideo Kojima or David Cage very easily fall under the lens of examination, pinned for dissection, idolisation and scrutiny.

> It's rare that fans get the chance to personify games, or to correlate them with a single voice

Invariably, the question arises of how to interpret the work that such people do – and whether to separate, say, Molyneux's games from the big promises he makes about them. These questions are starting to plague the indie space, too, where the cult of personality increasingly makes individual artists, musicians and designers stand out. Cactus has an unusual demeanour; Notch has a signature hat. It's possible now in the broadest fashion to see games as a creator-driven medium and less a suite of anonymous products shipped by faceless publishing empires to retail shelves. It makes games interesting, human, tangible.

And complicated. Take the case of Anna Anthropy, whose designs have the coarse, handmade feel of individualistic work as they aim to push the boundaries of what traditional audiences are comfortable with in their space. Her recent book, Rise Of The Videogame Zinesters, is something of a manifesto on democratising the creation of games, the better to make them more varied and inclusive.

But Anna herself is infamously prickly and difficult to please. Her readiness to fight and to criticise is often a challenge even for the biggest allies of her work – among which I include myself. She insults the press and then laments how difficult it is to get them to cover her. Her sharp bearing is fascinatingly at odds with her message of inclusivity.

Her work is often similarly divisive, too, with games about lesbian spider queens; submissives; or even her tender, thoughtful *Dys4ia* (about the hormone process involved in gender transition). Anna doesn't exactly take the uninitiated gently by the hand and attempt to explain herself to anyone.

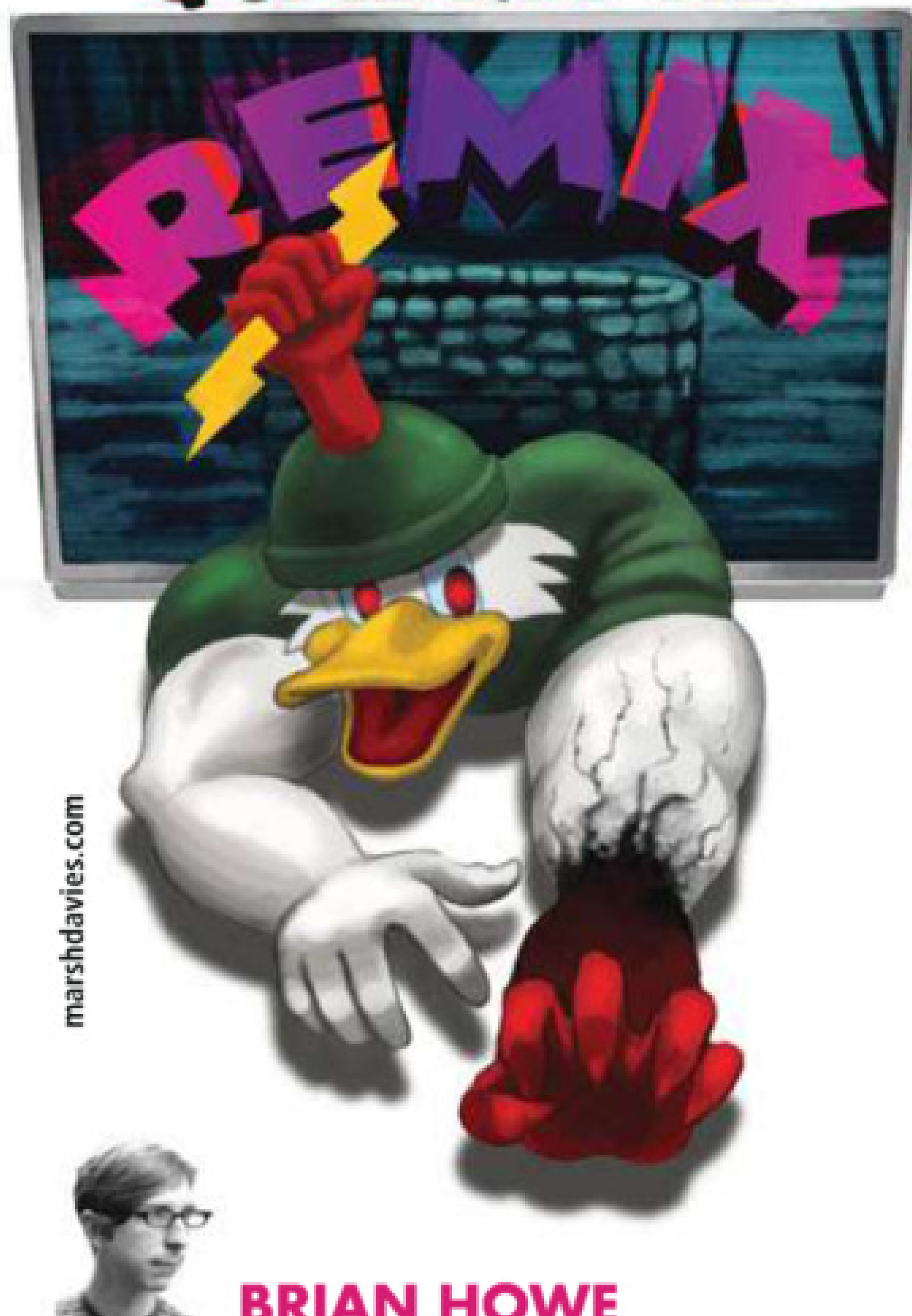
Yet that's one of my favourite things about her, and one of the reasons I respect her work so much. You don't have to like Anna or her games to appreciate that she's using design as a medium of self-expression, and that to play one of her games is to engage in a dialogue with a creator.

There is something brilliant about her refusal to cooperate, just as there's something poignant about Molyneux's fathomless faith, about Kojima's stubborn formatting. I don't want these people to toe the line; I want to be carried away with enthusiasm for *Curiosity*. I want to tell everyone about it, not because I find the idea of hundreds of people chipping away at a mystery to be captivating (though I do), but because the man believes in it so much.

The best games are a conversation between designer and player. Who wouldn't most like to have a conversation with an interesting, challenging person rather than one who only nods her head at you? Can you evaluate the work of a Peter Molyneux out of the context of his big promises and vast dreams? Maybe – but why would you want to?

Leigh Alexander is a widely published writer on the business, design and culture of videogames and social media





marshdavies.com



BRIAN HOWE

You're Playing It Wrong

This issue, our resident historian presents a brief history of the retro videogame remake trend

As the children of the '80s and '90s became the adults of the 21st century, they yearned to revisit the halcyon experiences of their youths. Publishers were happy to oblige these wistful gamers – those who had never heard of ROMs and emulators, anyway – by slapping hundreds of unmodified retro favourites onto compilation discs for various modern platforms. The only problem was that so many of the experiences of our youths kind of sucked. To revisit unvarnished classics as an adult was often tantamount to balling up memories of joy and throwing them into a furnace of frustrated rage, leading only to dismal reflections. How much precious childhood was squandered on hopeless attempts to refuel (let alone land) in *Top Gun*, while staring at an empty sky that roared like a demonic vacuum cleaner? How many sunny days passed while we failed to progress in the punitively difficult *Adventures Of Bayou Billy*? How many ballgames, days at the swimming pool, and (in the most serious cases) proms were missed while the body of a man-shaped turtle was repeatedly dashed upon underwater electricity traps? And how could a turtle-man even swim in water with electricity traps in it?

These kinds of adult questions didn't facilitate the childlike immersion we craved, but publishers quickly figured out what was missing, the crucial ingredient that couldn't be synthesised through mere reproduction. It was the feeling of unwrapping something shiny and new. Into this breach piled HD remakes and franchise reboots, conspiring to ensure that vomit-piles of '80s pixels would besmirch our rose-tinted spectacles no more. Whether re-envisioned from the ground up, top loaded with extra content, or just given a fresh coat of HD gloss, these games combined pacifying nostalgia with graphics that actually resembled the objects they represented and updated mechanics that weren't designed by vengeful nerds to destroy innocence. Why haphazardly command flickering sprites to leap down pits in *Double Dragon* when you could make slick 3D polygons zip around neatly in *Double Dragon Neon*? Why shoot monochromatic aliens in *Space Invaders* when you could shoot aliens of many colours in *Space Invaders Extreme*? Why hop around on three floating ledges in *Jetpac* when you could hop around on upwards of five in *Jetpac Refuelled*, thanks to advances in floating ledge technology? It was the best of both worlds: our childhoods, but contemporary, and as vivid as we remembered.

> It was the best of both worlds: our childhoods, but contemporary, and as vivid as we remembered

At first, the reservoir of legitimately beloved retro titles seemed to have no bottom to scrape. Players both nostalgic and new had a blast with the free-roaming thirdperson snake-kicking of *Kung Fu Freon*, the *Contra*-style multiplayer combat of *Duck Tales Double Bounce*, the incredibly crisp green murk of *Ikari Warriors HD*, the post-apocalyptic setting and cel-shaded art of *Chip 'n Dale Rescue Rangers ReLoaDed*, and the vastly expanded land of Sindarin in *Ironsword: Wizards & Warriors II: The Fabio X Chronicles*. But it was only a matter of time before surefire winners ran thin, giving way to just-passable projects. From *Ice Climber Hyperdrive*, *Athena: The Lone Programmer's Cut*, and *Altered Beast Komo-No-Tagi BeBeBe Phalanx*, it was a slippery slope down to rock bottom, paved with the likes of *Superer Pitfall* and *Renegade: Dawn Of Souls*, *Chubby Cherub Oxide* and *Bubsy 3HD*. Waiting at the end were *Custer's Revenge: Uncut*, *Plumbers Don't Wear Ties: Mega Slideshow*, *Zelda: The Wand Of Gamelon HD* (with extended cutscenes), *Shaq-Fu Re:Decodered*, *Catfight Classik*, and others too unspeakable to mention.

Having run out of good vintage games to remake, publishers and players together were seized by collective panic – had we run out of past, with nothing but future left before us? This was the only possible explanation for the subsequent glut of HD remake remakes, such as *Kung Fu Freon 10th Anniversary Dimensional Ascension* and *Ikari Warriors HD VR Edition*. Of course, it wasn't long then before publishers started remixing remakes of remakes, often blending the mechanics of several together. The mania for such titles drove the market towards producing fewer games, but with increasingly baffling playstyles and titles, such as *Supererest Altered Duck Chubby BeBeBe Oxide Tales Revenger HD VR 4D Remix Cubed*.

The trend continued until at last there was only one game left on the market. Its title contained every word in the English language and half of the Japanese language as well. It combined the mechanics and environments of every retro remake/remix, all behind an impenetrable array of brightly coloured energy and explosion effects, on a huge cartridge that you needed a custom-made Volkswagen-sized NES to play and an industrial fan to blow the dust out of. And that cartridge, my friends, is the exhibit we stand before now, at the conclusion of this tour of the retro videogame museum. As you are all aware, it killed the traditional videogame market, and everyone took up social and environmental activism, bringing real and lasting change to the world. I'm kidding, of course! We've all got holodecks now.

Next month in YPIW HD, we reissue my first column with a sexier font, funnier jokes, and an unedited Writer's Cut

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#249



THE GAMES IN OUR SIGHTS THIS MONTH



Environmental concern

From the everyman's FPS to the indie curio, games without a tale to tell are now the exception, not the rule. As a result, our medium is increasingly drawing from film, borrowing cinematic shorthand and recreating the tricks of the lens to provide a grounding for its tales. But films are directed, casting the audience forever as the tourist group, never the tour guide. Games, by contrast, can let you absorb a world at your own pace, from whichever angle you like, cracking open a rich vein of storytelling techniques that use seeded environmental clues.

One game that takes environmental storytelling to new heights is *Gone Home* (p54). Fullbright's exploration game sets you loose in an abandoned 1990s dwelling with a mystery at its heart, and then allows you to absorb as much or as little of its story as you care to from among its set dressing. It's an experiment in the power of paring back the familiar drone of narration and letting a world take centre stage.

Less radical but no less essential is Crystal Dynamics' environmental work on the *Tomb Raider* (p42) reboot. While camera diaries and voiceovers will deliver much of writer Rhianna Pratchett's attempts to humanise the new Lara Croft, the island on which our heroine finds herself also has a voice. It speaks through weatherbeaten shacks, ancient tombs and scarred vistas, but such harsh rasps are what will sell Lara's predicament to us, and make for a fitting counterpoint to the archaeologist's cut-glass tones.

Aliens: Colonial Marines (p46) will likewise rely on the hostile environment of LV-426 to help relay the events that have transpired since James Cameron's Aliens ended. But while the acid-burned walls of Hadley's Hope may evoke nostalgia, it's their freshest scars that will invoke the creeping sense of dread required to make you jump at every shifting shadow and sibilant hiss. Atmosphere it has – let's just hope its filmic roots won't impede satisfying level design.

MOST WANTED

Yakuza 5 PS3
As yet there's still no news of a western release for the game that Toshihiro Nagoshi said is so ambitious it's "like building a new house". Its Japanese demo suggests his new build has gone well, with a refined engine and a combat system that's more brutal than ever.

BioShock Infinite 360, PC, PS3
Forget the generic action box art – the more we see of *Infinite* itself, the more excited we get. The noirish vibe of Booker's hard-bitten cynicism is a thrill, as is the vision of an alternate America painted in shades of red blood, white-knuckle gunplay and endless blue sky.

Badland iOS
There's a strong pedigree behind this iOS sidescroller, which is being made by the lead programmer of *Trials Evolution*'s level editor and the artist of *MotoHeroz*. Though vehicles have been swapped out for a flying hedgehog, solid physics and a dazzling cartoon art style remain.

H | Y
P | E

TOMB RAIDER

Exploring the secret corners and dark mysteries of Lara's island prison

Publisher Square Enix
Developer Crystal Dynamics
Format 360, PS3, PC
Origin US
Release March 5, 2013

Well, it's taken her a shipwreck, some subsistence hunting, the skill to avoid two kidnapping attempts and a series of gunfights to get here but, finally, Lara Croft is raiding a tomb.

We find the entrance nestled in a crevice behind a waterfall in *Tomb Raider*'s first small hub area, but only after having searched some abandoned weatherworn shacks and scaled a sheer rock face. It's an unostentatious little hole that lacks the grandeur of some of the old Lara's discoveries (there will be no 100-foot-tall statues carved by the hands of alien civilisations inside), but that doesn't stop us feeling a slight thrill. It is, after all, our first archaeological find, and it's all the more intriguing for the fact that we could have blithely stumbled on by. And so Lara lights her torch and creeps inside.

It's tiny, barely a couple of chambers deep, but that doesn't stop the place feeling genuinely more tomb-like than the levels of previous games. Skeletal remains litter the floor of the cave, with what little lighting there is provided by Lara's guttering torch. We walk into the hollowed-out main chamber to find out what's buried here.

As it turns out, this tomb is the final resting place of a physics puzzle. It's built from the same ingredients (fire, flammable materials, weighted platforms) as the others we've seen, and when we solve it Lara is able to access a higher hidden level of the chamber. There's a golden chest up here, but it doesn't contain relics of a lost civilisation or a small fortune in doubloons. It contains something of much more practical value: a great big haul of Survival and Salvage points.

Two upgrade systems run through Crystal Dynamics' reboot, and Survival points relate to Lara herself. Any significant action, be it discovering secrets, killing an enemy or skinning a dear, will generate XP. Enough XP transforms into a single Survival point, which in turn can be exchanged for new abilities or improvements to old ones. Combat abilities are the most straightforward, offering Lara new skills, such as an improved dodge or melee attack, whereas Hunter and Salvage abilities let her extract more items and materials from the world. One Hunter upgrade, for example, allows Lara to pick out prey as well as items when she activates her

It's tiny, but that doesn't stop the place feeling more tomb-like than the levels of old

RIGHT **It's not just the islanders trying to kill Lara. Previous games were criticised for a laissez-faire approach to animal murder, but we don't think anyone except PETA will have much sympathy for these beasts**



www.bit.ly/UwsYU0
Screenshot gallery







RIGHT **Although she does express regret over her initial kills, Lara's soon forced to rack up quite a body count. The interleaving of exploration with the combat scenarios goes some way to retaining death's impact, however**

so-called Survival Instincts (another riff on *Batman: Arkham Asylum*'s Detective Vision).

Salvage points, meanwhile, upgrade Lara's gear. Her necessary first upgrade strengthens the handle of her axe, allowing her to crack open stone chests and use the tool as a makeshift lever when operating an ancient door-opening mechanism. From that point on, however, we're free to upgrade as we choose. We focus on Lara's stealthy bow – improving the firing rate and the length of time we can keep an arrow drawn, but we could have chosen to add a burst fire function to her pistol, or extend its magazine. Combat itself is brisk and violent: Lara hunches behind cover but doesn't actually stick to it, encouraging scrabbling movement from one safe point to the next.



Fire is often a tool for Lara. Torches can be lit at stone lanterns dotted all over the island, and wielding one doesn't alter movement. She can also throw flammable lanterns and then shoot them out of the air

The upgrade systems are conventional, then, but dovetail neatly with the game's survivalist and scavenger themes, giving you an incentive to explore and scour the more open (but not open-world) environments. They also give the tomb raiding a sense of purpose after decades of chasing plot devices on grandiose, globe-trotting adventures; emerging from a decrepit sepulchre with a payload of freshly looted upgrade points makes us feel genuinely richer.

This demo is our first opportunity to freely explore *Tomb Raider*'s island. It's often beautiful, but it's a raw, untamed kind of beauty. The lush vegetation blocks light and looks threateningly briery, waterfalls crash violently into rocks, while a mountain peak like a jagged tooth is found at its centre. The local wolves, meanwhile, are black, shaggy and utterly terrifying, as a claustrophobic visit to their den in search of a stolen pack of food and medical supplies confirms. The hub we're in feels small at first, but opens up when Lara's given a climbing tool by another survivor. It's simple enough to use (leap at an appropriate wall and hit X to stab it into the surface) and adds a massive dose of vertical freedom to Lara's traversal skills. More such gear gating is promised.

There's history here, too, some of which is clearly recent (the abandoned shacks, crashed WWII-era aircraft), but some of which is not – Lara finds shrines to Himiko, a shaman queen from ancient Japan, dotted around the island. It was Lara's search for Himiko's province, Yamatai, that led to her being shipwrecked here in the first place. If there's a supernatural twist being held back, though, it's subtle. Still, when Lara suddenly emerges from forest into some inexplicably snowy



Exhibit A

The script is keen to highlight Lara's archaeological background. Flashback scenes set aboard the HMS Endurance show her puzzling out the location of Yamatai while clashing with the doctor of archaeology in charge of the expedition. Dotted about the island, meanwhile, are relics. These are distinct from the game's many other collectibles due to the fact that you can examine 3D models of them in a menu screen. Do so and Lara will lecture you in her best schoolmistress voice about their origins. Apparently, you can divine that the owner of an ancient mask was wealthy due to the makeup stains inside.



Arrows fired by the bow can distract enemies, but the weapon can also be used for stealth kills up close and from afar. Here Lara uses the bow to crush a foe's windpipe



Crystal Dynamics has received criticism for making Lara seem weaker, but she shows plenty of strength in overcoming her fear and facing up to the island's dark threats

cliffs late in the demo, she remarks on the strangeness of the transition.

Himiko is at the centre of what is – for the first three hours at least – a deftly plotted narrative. The beginning of the game feels overly brisk, with barely an establishing shot of the HMS Endurance before a storm tears the ship apart. We don't get to meet the supporting cast, and more importantly, we don't really know who this new Lara is, despite a portentous voiceover. Conveniently, a member of Lara's party is a documentary filmmaker, and the discovery of her handheld camera at Lara's very first campsite allows for the backstory to be filled in at both this and subsequent rest stops. The Endurance's crew are well-drawn, too; the characterisation here is broad, but the performances uniformly high quality, and the camera footage identifies tensions the island is bound to exacerbate.

And what of Lara herself? Her much-discussed vulnerability isn't quite as heavily stressed as it was in the trailers. Indeed, she gets most of her screaming out of the way in the opening sequence, but there are touches – like her shivering before lighting a fire – that underscore the fact that she's a person, not a cartoon character any more. She no longer moves with an gymnast's grace, but with an athlete's stamina. All the bumps and scratches this Lara takes aren't there to make her seem weaker, but to show just what she's capable of enduring, just as the fact she displays fear early on allows her to show courage. There's a steely determination beneath the surface of the new Lara Croft, and the real question is simple: with a sizable kill count by the end of the demo, can Crystal Dynamics transform her into the icon we know without sacrificing her newfound humanity?

Q&A
Noah Hughes
Creative director, Crystal Dynamics

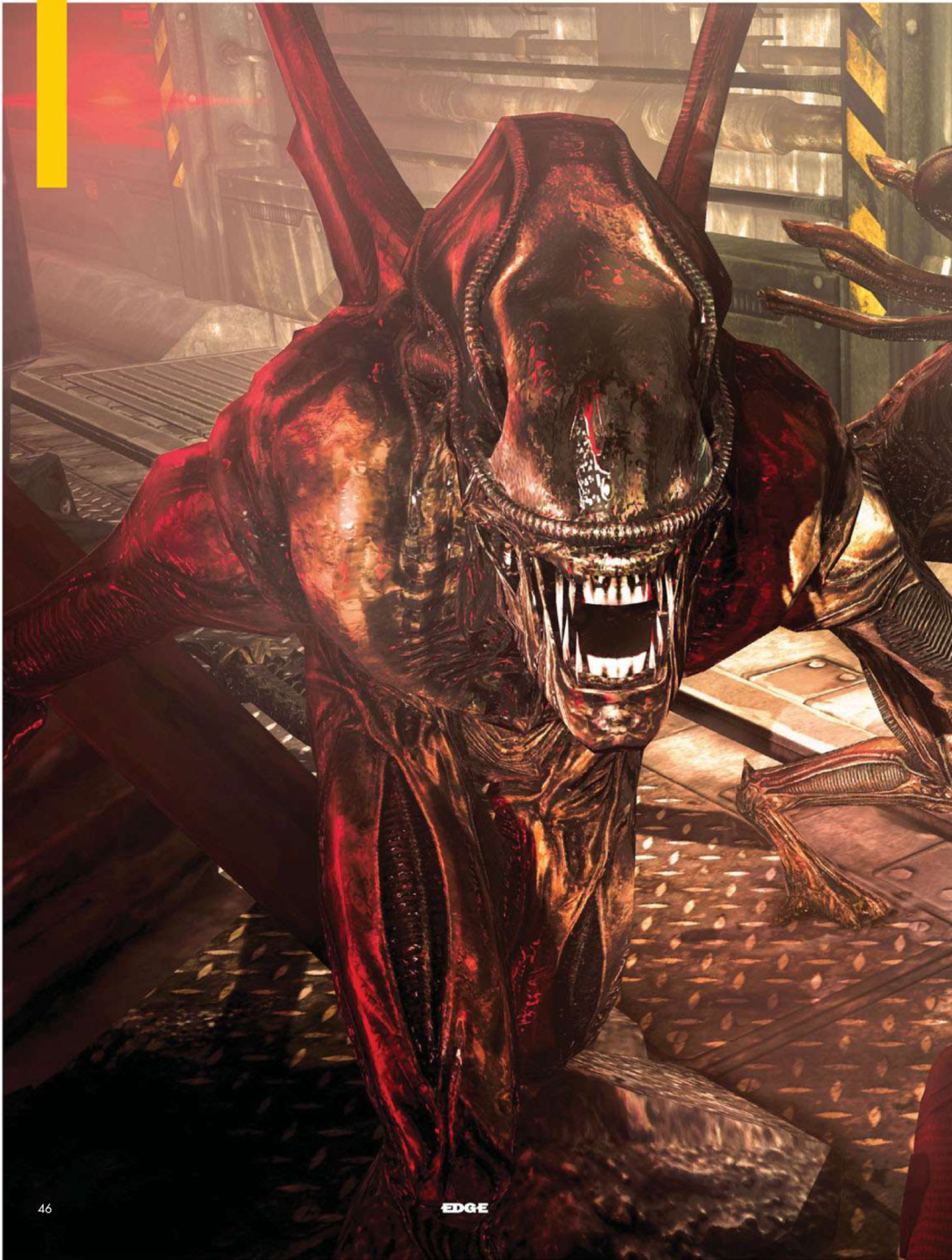


Tomb Raider games have traditionally been linear. Where have you taken inspiration for your hub structure?
I take inspiration from games like *Zelda* and *Metroid* and *Castlevania*. I mean, obviously we've made our own choices along the way, but our game is evocative of those. We're telling a fairly linear story, but we did want a sense of openness. We felt that if we went full open-world we might lose some of the power of the storytelling… and we might even lose some fidelity. We really tried to keep the world manageable so that we can deliver a sense of atmosphere and life within it.

How does it benefit the story you're telling?
We're really emphasising Lara's growth in this game, and that applies to the narrative, but it also applies to gameplay. Hubs really allow the player to feel more powerful. When you first go into that night hub, it can be a bit daunting, but then you come back to it with your gear, you come in at a higher vantage point, and it's daytime. We try to use events to mix up the world and make it feel a bit different, but you are coming back to that same space, and that becomes a measure of you as character; by the time you leave that hub, you really feel that you've conquered it.

Shifting to semi-open environments must mean you've had to rethink the nature of *Tomb Raider*'s platforming…
We certainly made some different choices. All along the way we've tried to evoke and leverage the *Tomb Raider* core gameplay mechanics and sensibilities, but I do think that the desire to create openness and a sense of player choice really did redefine the rules. We had to think of ways players could make their own way to a spot rather than work out the only route there. Having said that, we do try to evoke some of that classic *Tomb Raider* 'deconstruct your path' gameplay.

Sticky cover systems are almost taken for granted now. Why buck the trend?
That was an important choice for us, and there's some risk when you redefine the formula a bit. We wanted to update *Tomb Raider*'s combat, but to do it in a way that was appropriate to Lara. Part of that is she doesn't necessarily win by being the strongest or having the biggest guns. We wanted her to succeed through movement. A stick-to-cover system promotes staying in one place when we wanted to … promote Lara's movement *around* the space, be it from one bit of cover to the next, finding higher ground or taking advantage of environmental opportunities.



H | Y
P | E

ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES

The authenticity here is unquestionable, but will that be enough?

Publisher	Sega
Developer	Gearbox
Format	360, PC, PS3, Wii U
Origin	US
Release	February 12

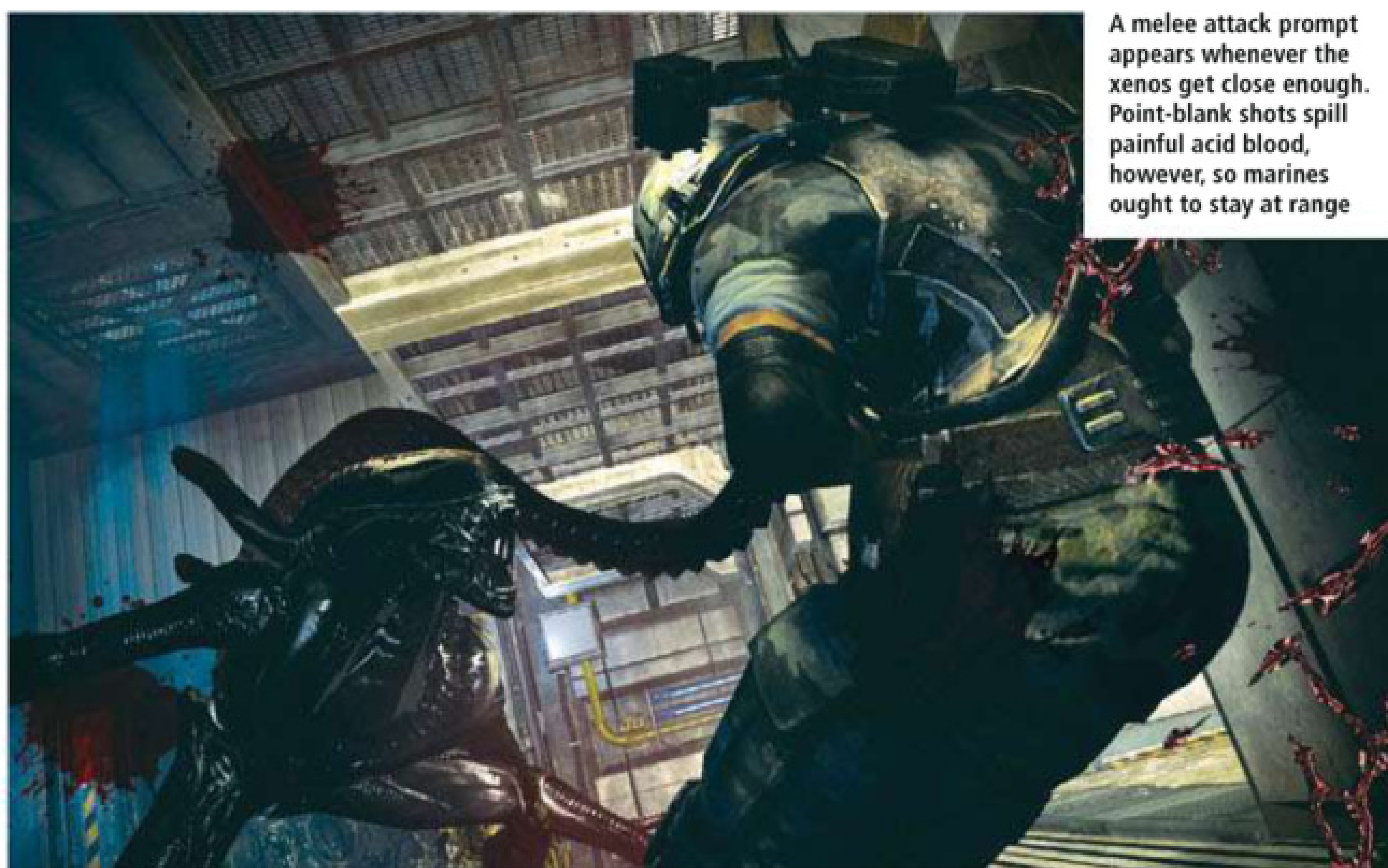
Xenomorphs look best at close quarters, where they have an uncanny knack of striking poses that you may recognise from the movies



ALIENS: COLONIAL MARINES



RIGHT **Your AI companions are handy enough with weapons and shout a lot, but they don't convey much humanity. Primarily, they're around to be extra guns**



A melee attack prompt appears whenever the xenos get close enough. Point-blank shots spill painful acid blood, however, so marines ought to stay at range

An awkward moment follows Gearbox's demonstration of *Aliens: Colonial Marines'* campaign. After a moodily lit climb up the floors surrounding the gigantic power generator of the marines' starship, the Sulaco, the Aliens fan in us is delighted to find it exactly as James Cameron's cast left it back in 1986. But then senior producer **Brian Burleson** is asked what Gearbox's new game brings to the firstperson shooter genre besides its storied, weighty licence.

In a way, it's an unfair question: the licence dictates everything, including weapon balance, enemy movement speed and level design, and by committing to authenticity Gearbox leaves itself little room for experimentation. But there the question lingers. After such a long spell in development, and such an ardent focus on fan service, is *Colonial Marines* really a game, or a movie set tour? Burleson replies with a smile: "It has aliens in it."

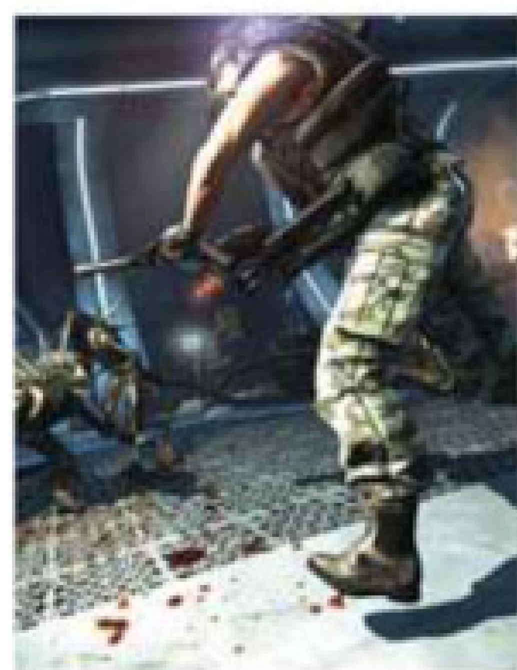
It's immediately evident when playing the solo campaign that *Colonial Marines* is as uncomplicated as Burleson's answer, its appeal lying in its fanatical attention to detail. Our playthrough begins with a trot across the surface of LV-426. The mission takes place after the events of Alien 3, with the aim of finding out what happened on the Sulaco's doomed mission to the planet. Our fellow marines trudge behind us – ready to be controlled by either online co-op buddies or AI. Stumbling over the Hadley's Hope sign and seeing the colony emerge from the gloom is surprisingly powerful. Gearbox's enthusiasm for the game's deferred lighting system isn't just bluster. The lighting instead adds to the atmosphere, used thoughtfully to create arresting silhouettes and to rattle your confidence – the next dark corner may not hide a xenomorph, but you're never sure.

The lighting adds to the atmosphere, used thoughtfully to create arresting silhouettes

"We spent a lot of our preproduction time making this custom lighting system that plugs into Unreal Engine 3," explains environment artist **Chris Neely**. "We had to design something from the ground up that would give us the capability to create… all this tension, to create all these dynamic events and to recreate the look and feel of what we experienced growing up watching [Aliens]."

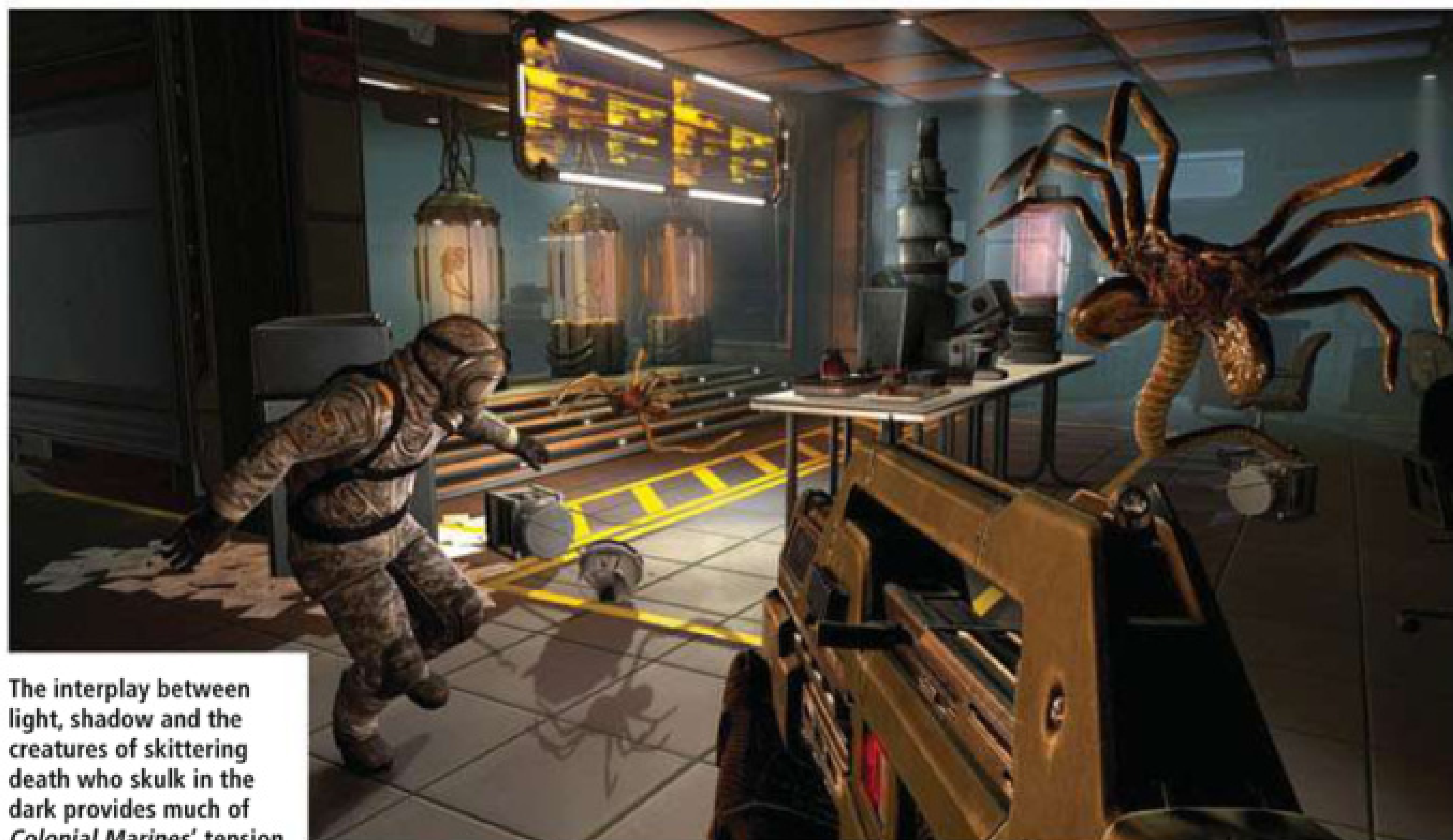
It's the latter where *Colonial Marines* exudes confidence, with tonal and narrative continuity its métier. That brings its own problems, though. Many areas in the game were imagined by futurist concept artist Syd Mead some 27 years ago, meaning they were designed without AI pathfinding or drop-in co-op in mind. The in-game result is a mission structure similar to *BioShock* and the *System Shock* games, but on a far smaller scale. Hadley's Hope has you backtracking through areas and revisiting central hubs, but several of the objectives in *Colonial Marines* feel oversimplified. After a vivid introduction to the colony's acid-splashed corridors, it's a real disappointment to have to place motion trackers in a few nearby rooms, and then shuffle a sentry gun back to where you started to make an inevitable stand against the aliens.

Not everything is mere re-creation; on the lower decks, we discover a new breed – the purposeless, Queen-less xenomorphs who have been stewing in Hadley's Hope. These new aliens, nicknamed 'Boilers,' are effectively *Colonial Marines'* nod to the zombie trend.



Ultimate badasses

While you occasionally face the aliens alone, it's your squad members who dictate the flow of combat and the narrative. The handlebar-mustachioed Cruz wields with arms as big as a racehorse's legs a smartgun and provides covering fire as well as testosterone-fuelled growls. Bella and Reid tick the strong female character box, the former bringing to mind a subdued Vasquez while Reid lavishes you with unprovoked exposition at every turn – more Noomi Rapace than Sigourney Weaver. Other allies include Bishop and Commander Shannon, voiced by Aliens stalwarts Lance Henriksen and William 'Lt Gorman' Hope.



The interplay between light, shadow and the creatures of skittering death who skulk in the dark provides much of *Colonial Marines*' tension



Visually degraded and reckless, they attack with no regard for their own safety.

Colonial Marines' multiplayer will likely prove more divisive than its campaign, though the game modes make sense. Escape tasks squads of four marines with reaching a dropship in time by hitting checkpoints, all while a four-strong squad of xenomorphs aims to halt their progress. In Extermination, marines must guard bombs planted above a hive – after the round's up, the sides swap and the winning team is determined by the number of bombs armed. Matches are balanced on a knife edge, forcing marines to move in a perpetual huddle and demanding cunning from the agile but brittle xenos.

The divisive element will be the thirdperson perspective when playing a xenomorph: it might serve to augment your peripheral vision, but it shines a spotlight on moments of unconvincing animation and is hampered by wilful camera work. The aliens' Spitter class doesn't require much precision to fire off its acid-based ranged attacks, but the Soldier and Lurker stealth class require absolute fluidity when moving from surface to surface, and wrestling with the camera is antithetical to that. The central idea here is that you're forced to think like a xenomorph, but it'll take a lot of late nights at the studio's Texas HQ before you start to feel like one.

Colonial Marines looks set to be the best Aliens game since 1999's nervy *Aliens Versus Predator*, then, but will its atmosphere and your inner Aliens fan be enough to convince you to turn a blind eye to its awkward mission design and sub-par animations? Or will it end up feeling like one of 2007's best shooters, and thus curiously out of time? ■

Q&A

Brian Burleson
Senior producer, Gearbox



How did the Boiler come about?
They're an interesting mystery. In Hadley's Hope, the atmosphere processor blew up. So they lost their queen, and these xenos have been down there a long time. And so [nobody's] quite sure what happened to these guys. They're kind of broken. These are the type of xenos who have no purpose. There are no eggs, but they still kept on building a hive, kept on grabbing people, but there's no facehuggers – what happens? Also, something happened to the air… When you're playing the game, you get an understanding of what happened to these guys, how they came about. But the best way to put it is: they're at the end of their life. They're not doing so hot, so they have nothing to lose.

Did you have problems with *Colonial Marines*' story and Prometheus clashing?
We'd seen the script before the film came out, and fortunately it didn't change anything for us. The [Prometheus] timeline is set way before Aliens, which definitely helps. But there's some other things we got to see, like Weyland-Yutani – they're pretty hi-tech. Colonial marines are not so much, because they're industrial. Caterpillar – do they have touch screens in their tractors and stuff? No, you don't need it… But seeing that contrast was really cool. There's some things that we'd been doing that we took further when Prometheus came out. Retro tech is super cool, but no one went hundreds of years into the future and got rid of touchscreens, right? It made the universe more full. It made sense. I can't wait to see what comes next – Ridley Scott, he has a vision. [Gearbox CCO] Brian Martel tortures us because he knows what's going on, but he's like, 'I don't wanna ruin the trust.'

The challenge in making this game must be that a good movie set doesn't naturally translate into a good piece of level design. How are you overcoming that?
In some of the spaces, there are possibilities. You can just see in the drop ship hangar there's possibilities; in Hadley's Hope there's possibilities – we saw combat there. A lot of the hallways in Hadley's Hope we saw combat in. A lot of the other environments you saw are historical; they're sets. When you traverse them, they have purpose in the story and they have some purpose in what's going on in the universe. But it's historical, so you get to appreciate that's where that happened, or that's where Ripley and Newt were… And in the combat spaces, you have your squad with you, and you have all these other things going on. It just depends on the environment.

H | Y
P | E

METRO: LAST LIGHT

Metro's nuclear winter is thawing, but will gamers warm to this sequel?

Publisher THQ
Developer 4A Games
Format 360, PC, PS3
Origin Ukraine
Release March 2013

Metro: Last Light, like its divisive predecessor, is an exploration of tension. Not just in the near-crippling strain you feel when you're forced to proceed along its gloomy tunnels, which are inhabited by people – or worse – intent on shortening your journey, but also between light and dark, the need to save ammo against the will to survive, or the implications of choosing to kill a pleading enemy or leave him be. But of all the dichotomies that define *Last Light*'s bleak world, perhaps the biggest tug of war is found in 4A's desire to span the gap between FPS and narrative adventure.

It's an ambition that made 2010's *Metro 2033* a hard sell. The studio's desire to subvert gaming's most popular genre with wilfully awkward controls meant many misunderstood its intentions – squeezing the right trigger to fire and hitting A to jump may have felt familiar, but 2033 bore only superficial similarities to *Modern Warfare*. That desire also yielded one of the most atmospheric firstperson games in recent memory, even if its gunplay didn't match its world building.

With *Last Light*, 4A promises to not only address the first game's deficiencies, but to build upon its successes. It aims to streamline the controls, improve the AI and pathfinding, and open out the level design. And, crucially, *Last Light* will emerge blinking from the gloom at a time when the boundaries between genres are being challenged with increasing regularity. *Last Light* may not conform to tidy genre conventions, but this time the market may be a little more willing to step outside of its comfort zone.

We start our time with the game in an underground level set just before the events of this year's E3 demonstration. Crawling into the map through a vent before dropping down into an industrial space crisscrossed with metal platforms and makeshift wooden barriers, *Last Light*'s world is familiarly *Metro*. Indeed, this sequel picks up directly after the events of 2033, casting you as returning protagonist Artyom. But this Artyom is stronger and more capable after his previous ordeal, a fact that's underscored by numerous subtle touches, such as the way he now confidently loads both shells into his makeshift shotgun at once, rather than fumble them into the barrels one at a time. ➋

> ***Last Light's world is familiarly Metro. Indeed, this sequel picks up directly after 2033***

RIGHT ***Metro*'s universe is often dingy but characterful, and it offers a distinct sense of place through both its dripping tunnels and its radiation-bleached skies. Its peers are the likes of City 17, Rapture and Dunwall**





BELOW While *2033* was based on the book of the same name, author Dmitry Glukhovsky felt that its written sequel, Metro 2034, wasn't suited to being a game, so worked with 4A on an original tale



He's deadly, too. You can fell enemies with a stealth attack when you get close enough, while silenced weaponry will fling ball bearings through the flesh of isolated targets without alerting those nearby. It's possible to move through most levels without ever being detected, a strategy aided by a blue lozenge on Artyom's watch that gets brighter depending on how well lit you are. As before, you can snuff out light sources (either by hand or with a well-aimed projectile) and fastidious players can plunge levels into total darkness. You can choose to effect nonlethal takedowns as well, a decision that doesn't feed into any clear black-and-white morality meter, but is yours to make regardless.

The level we're in, we're told, is small in comparison to later spaces, but even so it's clear that 4A has widened your options. In the first main room alone, there's a hatch that opens into the sewer running beneath the metal platforms, a staircase that leads up to a higher platform, and a passageway to the left, which presents an opportunity to flank the three men we hear chatting on the central walkway. Of course, you could also fight your way through, guns blazing, but you'd need to make strategic use of the destructible cover scattered about to emerge unscathed.

Another level we see provides a distinctive counterpoint to the first one's slow-paced, claustrophobic skulking. Beginning as Artyom emerges into the disintegrated remains of Moscow, the most immediately noticeable change is the sunlight penetrating the swirling cloud above, illuminating patches of grass on the wide-open space ahead. *Metro 2033*'s suffocating nuclear winter is thawing.

"*Metro 2033*'s environments had this very cold, inhospitable feel about them, but they were quite uniform," THQ's studio communications lead **Huw Beynon** tells us. "We have lots and lots of different outdoor styles now. We're trying to maintain 2033's bleak outlook, but there's a much broader palette to play with."

> ***The immediately noticeable change is sunlight penetrating the swirling cloud above***

One of the defining aspects of 2033's outdoor areas was the sense of vulnerability they generated. Away from the close walls of the Metro system, and with you forced to wear a mask to survive, the game conjured up a remarkable sense of isolation. *Last Light*'s open air sections are just as powerful, with droplets of water forming on your mask that you'll need to manually wipe away, and the constant sound of your strained breathing serving to remind you that there's only a filter

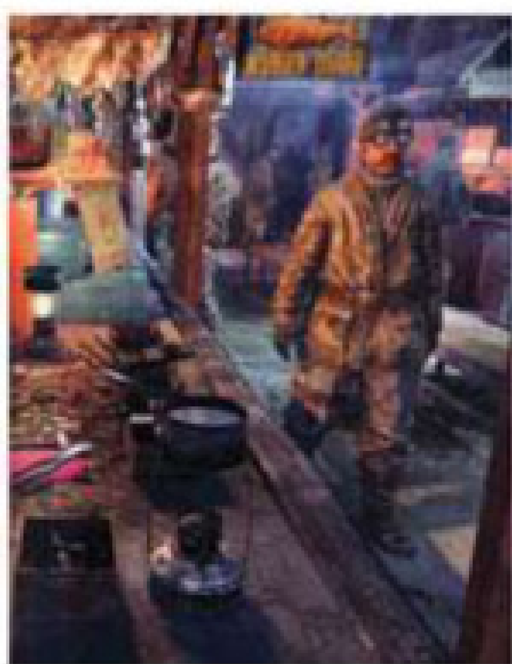
Q&A
Huw Beynon
Studio communications lead, THQ



Many players didn't really get what *2033* was trying to do – how do you intend to communicate what *Last Light*'s about?
Marketing campaigns for games are big, complex beasts and they run over many months. What we really want gamers to feel when they see this is a world to explore that feels completely different to any other game environment. We see the same realistic jungles, deserts [and so on] trotted out with increasing regularity these days. What we're trying to get through the game is a sense of visiting a unique and incredible world, like Rapture or City 17; places that have real personality about them. If we can sell that idea, then we'll have done our job.

4A's a PC-focused developer – how have you found working with consoles?
It's inevitable that the PC is going to look better, particularly when you have a team like ours at 4A where high-end PC stuff has always been a huge focus. *Metro 2033*, along with *Crysis*, is probably still one of *the* benchmarks for your PC's performance because of the stuff it was doing. This time round, we've certainly expanded on the capabilities of the engine. At the same time, we've been improving and refining our own tools. We've got much better performance out of the engine on the mid- and lower-range PCs, and that works out really well for the consoles – [despite] all of the additional features that we've put in, whether it's more destruction, weather effects or advanced lighting, etc, there's no gameplay difference between formats.

4A's vision seems uncompromised in today's age of focus testing.
The Ukrainian game industry is tiny, and the studio at 4A is made up of artists, engineers, mathematicians and scientists all pulled from different careers and backgrounds. Their whole working process is very different, and the things that they see as important are very different… Creatively and commercially, they're much freer from those kinds of pressures. And I think that explains the unique feel of the game. For some people, it may feel a little bit alien – hopefully in a good way. It should feel like a breath of fresh air. We're not trying to appeal to the mythical broader audience by doing this, that or the other. I think it's absolutely critical that the studio is allowed to pursue the creative goal that they've set themselves. THQ's job is to make sure that message gets across better this time. Because, by our own admission, we didn't recognise what a polished gem we had in the stable last time around.



Now arriving at platform one

Metro 2033's underground settlements return in *Last Light*, providing hub areas in which to trade goods and drink in the heady atmosphere of 4A's intricately thought-out world. One of these new areas is Venice Station City, a town built from platforms suspended above a now-disused sewer system. Guns can be bought and modified via some stall-holders, while others offer you minigame distractions, but the plot doesn't come to a grinding halt when you reach these towns – our purpose in this less architecturally beautiful take on Venice is to track down a ne'er-do-well who's hiding out in a brothel. Listening to the conversations of the inhabitants of such hubs will also help you fill out *Last Light*'s backstory.

ABOVE **Though 4A has yet to implement *Last Light*'s HUD, it aims to keep the overlay minimal, communicating important information such as remaining ammo and concealment through your weaponry and accessories**

and thin sheet of pockmarked plastic between you and the hostile environment all around.

Just like before, your watch shows how much time is left before another filter is required, but now there's also a day/night cycle to worry about. Outdoor levels are populated by a menagerie of mutants, all either scavenging or hunting each other until your presence disturbs them. Take too long, and you'll have to complete your objective in the fading light – or, worse, dark – and fend off attacks from more aggressive enemies.

In this particular level, we're tasked with acquiring some fuel to power a ferry. There are a number of places the precious liquid can be found, including a garage and a crash-landed plane, and you're free to choose your own route. There are very few clues however, and the long grass, dilapidated buildings and mutant attacks pile on the pressure as you try to figure out which way is fastest, or at least safest. The sense of being lost is one 4A is trying to engender, and while we have a guide for this playthrough, it's encouraging to see the studio giving its world more breathing space.

Of course, another tension tied to *Last Light* is publisher THQ's ailing fortunes, but the rescue package offered by investors should ensure 4A is given enough time to polish its game. But *Last Light* remains a difficult proposition to communicate in a world of bullet points and neatly packaged sound bites, and its focus on Russian – rather than American – culture, while laudable, further narrows its market. Still, 4A's unwavering focus on the integrity of its vision means that as *Last Light* explores its own dark notions of tension, it's unlikely to include any slack.



H | Y
P | E

GONE HOME

The Fullbright Company's debut explores growing up

Publisher The Fullbright Company
Developer In-house
Format PC
Origin US
Release 2013



This is the room of the player character's sister, Sam. The locker almost certainly contains personal secrets and perhaps clues about the disappearance of her and your family, but you'll need to find the combination



GONE HOME



The empty pizza box and untidy furniture offer signs of an unplanned departure, but what caused everyone to leave so quickly? That's the mystery at the heart of Fullbright's first game

Things change when you're away from home. Siblings grow up, relationships grow, and lives move on. In *Gone Home*, the change is a drastic one. You arrive back at your family's abode after a prolonged trip in Europe to find the house dark and abandoned. On the door, you find a note from your sister asking you not to worry, but not to look for her either. Packing boxes sit in the hall. These are the first strands of a mystery, one that will take you deep into the mind of a teenage girl.

> ***You simply explore the empty house, slowly revealing Sam's story at your own pace***

You may see *Gone Home* through the eyes of returnee Katie, but the real star of the game is her sister, Sam. Told by way of photographs, scraps of paper and diary entries, hers is a coming-of-age tale more dramatic and captivating than most. It's a story that follows this bright but lonely teen as she starts to become aware of new music, subculture and the wider world. Some of it is narrated directly to you by Sam in a manner that's reminiscent of *BioShock*'s audio diaries, drawing on the experience of The Fullbright Company founding members, many of whom were involved in making the well-received *Minerva's Den* DLC for *BioShock 2*.

While the deserted house may put you in mind of *Resident Evil's* Spencer Mansion, there's no combat or danger – *Gone Home* is purely about exploration. The Fullbright Company has stripped down its game to the point where all you can do is walk around the house, albeit freely, picking up objects and turning them around in your hands. Some are relevant to Sam's tale, but others focus on her parents, or reveal nothing of value at all. It's up to you to piece together as much or as little of the incidental details as you please.

There are small puzzles, but they're rarely more mind bending than locating a key or discovering a combination for a lock. *Gone Home* is restrained enough to let you simply explore the empty house, slowly revealing Sam's story at your own pace. The contained setting – although generously proportioned – gives it an intimate feel that's conducive to the mystery driving you onwards.

That feeling of intimacy, and the inherent familiarity of its family home setting, could be what ultimately sets *Gone Home* apart from contemporary exploration games such as *Dear Esther*. And because it is attempting to tell a story about familial rifts, such a connection is exactly what it needs to foster if it is to deliver its tale successfully. ■

Q&A
Steve Gaynor
Co-founder, The Fullbright Company



Warning: the following includes major plot details from *Gone Home*'s first chapter.

Why did you decide to tell this story by way of an exploration game?
A lot of games that have [exploration] elements are also shooters or RPGs or some other genre. We had a unique opportunity to say "all you do is explore". There doesn't have to be an excuse to do that. We can just tell a story about normal people living their lives and the more subtle drama that comes out of that. If you find out all of that stuff yourself, if you feel like you're in control of that ability to pull that information in, it just gives it that much more impact.

1995 Seattle is awfully specific, why that time period and locale?
We wanted to make it a relatable setting that was an actual time and set of experiences that people playing the game are familiar with. But past 1995, stuff starts going into text messages and email. You don't get to pick up the physical scrap of paper... We also had Sam's story. If we started with Romeo and Juliet, Montagues and Capulets is not especially contemporary or relatable. Seventeen years ago especially, a conflict that would arise in a family if somebody falls in love with somebody [undesirable to the family] – that wouldn't be a heterosexual relationship. That's something that's actually relevant to people now, and was really interesting for us to explore.

Why audio diaries?
Giving [Sam] a voice and letting her explain herself in her own words makes her much more human. We started with her tearing up her diary and throwing pages around the house. As soon as we did that, it wasn't a real house any more. As soon as you find a random torn-out diary page that's perfectly tucked away somewhere, it's like 'Oh, yeah. This is a videogame.' We wanted her voice to be the conduit for her experience.

Why did you choose punk rock, and riot grrrl bands for Sam to get into?
The story we wanted to tell about Sam was her being exposed to a wider world and finding out about new [experiences]. Any subculture can have these aspects, but the one that we chose also has a certain anti-authoritarian thrust to it. It speaks pretty directly to Sam becoming an independent person and solidifying who she is as an individual. In a way, it encourages her to be more open with that and push further towards stuff she's not comfortable with.

HYPE

COMPANY OF HEROES 2

Sink your boots into the thick crust of Relic's Russian winter

Publisher	THQ
Developer	Relic
Format	PC
Origin	Canada
Release	March 2013



RIGHT **Soviet High Command was famously ruthless with the forces at its disposal. The orders it will expect you to carry out will cause tension among your troops and bring some moral ambiguity to your objectives in the singleplayer campaign**

We've become accustomed to tales of the Allied advance into Germany. From *Call Of Duty* to Saving Private Ryan and Band Of Brothers, scenes of the Normandy landings and Operation Market Garden have been hammered into our minds. As a fervour for torn-from-the-headlines Middle Eastern settings sweeps the field, Relic returns with a new angle on an old war, and a campaign that dives into the wintry mire of the Eastern Front.

The sequel will span the entire four-year conflict. A roaming war reporter serves as a unifying narrative device to embed players in the platoons that participated in defining missions such as Operation Barbarossa and the assault on Berlin. The campaign follows the Soviets exclusively, but Relic wants to focus on the lives of soldiers rather than the politics of the era. "We're definitely not trying to make you root for an ideology," says campaign designer **Jacen Torres**. "The guys on the battlefield are really no different than you and I, other than they went through some of the worst things people have ever seen, and they did incredible things."

Relic wants you to care about your troops, which is why it's so keen to generate a strong sense of authenticity on the battlefield. Gun sounds are recorded from working variants of

Off-map bombardment abilities can summon planes to obliterate a targeted area. Each bombing run drains your resources, but they're a great way to break a stalemate

the weapons the Soviets and Germans used. Artillery strikes are modelled from archive footage. It shows. Anti-tank shells ricochet visibly when they strike a tank's sloped forward armour, snow melts due to flaming buildings and ice cracks under fire. There's tremendous attention to detail throughout.

That authenticity runs deeper than visual polish. *Company Of Heroes* still feels an age apart from a traditional RTS. Success doesn't flow from a perfectly executed build order or efficient resource management. Paranormal mouse dexterity isn't needed to rustle your troops into attack formation. Turtling back at base to hoard forces for a big push won't work here. Your aims and actions are driven by instinct and a desire to steal ground.

At its core, *Company Of Heroes 2* is about taking and holding territory. Resources, normally confined to convenient clumps of all-purpose minerals, are scattered about the map as points to be captured, inviting players to form battle lines quickly. Conflict is never immediately decisive, even if the forces involved are horribly mismatched. There's always time to retreat or shift the line to regain an advantage. Success and failure depend on methodical mastery of the terrain. It's a less abstract simulation of warfare than many of its competitors.

The biggest additions to *Company Of Heroes 2* are dedicated to making these vital maps more complex and changeable. The True Sight fog of war system only reveals the parts of the battlefield that your forces can see, which means you'll have to carefully direct the sight lines of your forward troops to scout out the enemy before committing to combat. With it, winding streets and thick forests become instantly claustrophobic, and there's a great strategic benefit to holding major highways and watchtowers.

The Russian winter also has the potential to change a battlefield entirely. Snow can slow troops down, while hypothermia can kill them. A thermometer bar indicates the dropping temperatures of men who spend too much time out of cover, buildings or vehicles. If that expires, they lose health, and will eventually curl up and die. Blizzards sweep in now and then with little warning. The flurries of snow reduce visibility, slow vehicles and kill your men even faster.

Company Of Heroes 2's scraps feel wonderfully desperate, and the shifting battle lines give each contest its own narrative. The fight for an icy river crossing can escalate to a horrifying meat grinder in minutes, and there's a kernel of chance at the heart of each encounter that allows the smallest squads to hold out just a bit longer than you'd expect, turning humble engineers into heroes. Senior games designer **Matthew Berger** lists this element of chance as one of the "quirks and peculiarities" of the series. In a genre awash with nostalgia, that shock of peculiarity is even more welcome. ■



Beyond the Eastern Front

Relic is already planning DLC for *Company Of Heroes 2*. New multiplayer maps and commanders, which offer special in-game abilities such as airstrikes and special troops, will go on sale after release and a Theatre Of War mode will allow the developer to drop in new singleplayer scenarios. These standalone missions give the team space to cover major battles that don't fit into the campaign narrative, and may even venture to new fronts. A levelling system will bolster the multiplayer game, too, giving players the chance to unlock more commanders as well as vehicle skins based on historically accurate camouflage patterns.



THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

Publisher Bethesda Softworks | **Developer** ZeniMax Online Studios | **Format** PC, Mac | **Origin** US | **Release** 2013



With each one of the *Elder Scrolls* games having focused on a different slice of Tamriel, the thought of being able to explore the world in its entirety is a tantalising prospect indeed. Even more enticing is the idea of being able to explore it with your friends, which promises to be far less of a headache now that ZeniMax Online has decided to do away with server shards and populate a single 'Mega Server'. Ambitiously, the combat aims to push realtime online action forward with a nuanced use of both mouse and keyboard inputs. If *Skyrim* was epic, then this expanded universe might require a more grandiose adjective to encapsulate.

DEAD ISLAND: RIPTIDE

Publisher Deep Silver | **Developer** Techland
Format 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** Poland | **Release** April 2013



The saying 'once bitten, twice shy' has been punned on a lot in zombie settings, but it perfectly describes how many players felt about the emotionally charged *Dead Island* trailer, which bore little resemblance to the game it teased. *Riptide*'s CGI trailer about two seafaring lovers' murder-suicide goes for a similarly heart-tugging response, so we hope Techland has learned its lesson and that those strong human relationships will translate over into the game itself.

MAIA

Publisher Simon Roth | **Developer** In-house
Format Mac, PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** June (estimated)



Now that its nail-biting Kickstarter campaign is over, a late rally having pushed it far beyond its finish line, Simon Roth's *Maia* is a go. The love child of *Dwarf Fortress* and *Dungeon Keeper* will be born aboard a creepy interplanetary outpost. Did we mention it has a procedurally generated world?

STAR TREK

Publisher Namco Bandai, Paramount | **Developer** Digital Extremes
Format 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** Canada | **Release** Early 2013



Now that JJ Abrams has rebooted the franchise for movie-goers, it makes sense to revisit the series' interactive prospects. Star Trek meets *Mass Effect*, the game's co-op focus has a natural starting point, given Kirk and Spock's close bond and combat skills, but divergent personalities.

INJUSTICE: GODS AMONG US

Publisher Warner Bros Games | **Developer** NetherRealm Studios
Format 360, PS3, Wii U | **Origin** US | **Release** April 2013



When we say that superheroes fight crime, let's be honest: we really just mean they fight criminals. As it happens, the studio behind *Mortal Kombat* knows a thing or two about fighting and DC Comics has entrusted NetherRealm with more than 20 of its characters to throw in a game and let them do just that.

SUI GENERIS

Publisher Bare Mettle Entertainment | **Developer** In-house
Format PC | **Origin** UK | **Release** TBC



You could say it looks generic, but Bare Mettle has stressed that it's still early days for physics-based RPG *Sui Generis*. This attempt to topple prevailing RPG design wisdom is set to feature nuanced combat over mindless clicking, and has an ambient narrative that you'll have to uncover yourself.

SNIPER: GHOST WARRIOR 2

Publisher City Interactive | **Developer** In-house
Format 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** Poland | **Release** January 2013



Maybe it's a sign of cowardice, but there are few pleasures in an FPS that compare with that cheeky feeling of peering down a sniper scope at a bad guy in his lookout post, who's utterly oblivious, just waiting for your bullet. The stunning visuals of CryEngine 3 can only sweeten the experience, right?

FINAL FANTASY XIV ONLINE: A REALM REBORN

Publisher Square Enix | **Developer** In-house (Product Development Division 3) | **Format** PC, PS3 | **Origin** Japan | **Release** 2013



Sometimes if you're playing an underwhelming character in an RPG, it's worth grinding out a few levels to upgrade them. Other times, you have to cut your losses and reroll. Square Enix is doing the latter with *Final Fantasy XIV*, with a new graphics engine, UI, server system, job classes – the works.

REMEMBER ME

Publisher Capcom | **Developer** Dontnod Entertainment
Format 360, PC, PS3 | **Origin** France | **Release** May 2013



As hackers such as Anonymous continue to legitimise paranoia around cyber security and bionic augmentation becomes increasingly doable, *Remember Me*'s futuristic Parisian dystopia gains relevance. Dontnod wants to provide a new experience for players tired of the gun-toting dude stereotype; co-founder Jean-Maxime Moris claims it wants to prove that "you can have something that's kick-ass, something that's powerful, and you don't need it to be ultraviolent".



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GRAND THEFT AUTO V

Publisher Rockstar Games | **Developer** In-house (Rockstar North) | **Format** 360, PS3 | **Origin** UK | **Release** Spring 2013



Are you ready to rob some banks? Because the three co-protagonists of *GTAV* are strapped for cash and they're not interested in filling out loan paperwork. Even though *Resident Evil 6* may have recently trotted out a trio of primary characters, each with a discrete campaign, Rockstar's massive new venture does the hard, messy work of blending its three stories into a single game. Like *Driver: San Francisco*, you can switch between characters on the fly by pulling out to a Google Earth-style vantage and selecting a new host. Each character's life will carry on when you leave them, too, which has vast storytelling potential.

FRESH BLOOD

Dark Souls II heralds a change in leadership and elevates the series' creative and technical aspirations. We visit the game's birthplace to discover what new adventures lie in store



We might as well start by telling you about the thing that we've been expressly prohibited from telling you about. Our visit to FromSoftware's Tokyo headquarters is drawing to a close. One of the studio's programmers has connected a high-end gaming laptop to the boardroom television. He uses it to play through a roughly 10-minute-long sequence of *Dark Souls II* while we look on so intently that it feels like laser beams might inadvertently burst from our retinas at any moment. Luckily for you, we haven't been sworn to absolute secrecy – we just can't tell you the nature of the scenario playing out onscreen, or describe the environment we find ourselves presented with. If the *Dark Souls* series has perfected one thing over the five years since its conception, it's the fine art of how to hug its playing cards tightly to its scuffed and dented breastplate.

What we are at liberty to tell you is that *Dark Souls II* has just loosened the screws holding our jaw in place. We're talking about an athletic leap forward in terms of graphical fidelity. There was an endearing shonkiness to the visual presentation of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. The latter was handsome in an impressionistic way, but you never sensed photorealism was a virtue the team held in particularly high regard. Grainy textures and periodic framerate nosedives further reinforced this sense of underlying technical crudity, as if the game was huffing and puffing while trying to keep up with a restless creative imagination that was forever darting ahead. The game was a masterpiece for myriad other reasons, but it always felt more horse-drawn than driven by an engine with real horsepower.

Dark Souls II, by contrast, looks effortlessly ready for the next generation of consoles, on a par with the fidelity of, say, *Watch Dogs* and *Star Wars 1313*. Dynamic realtime lighting makes the interplay between light and darkness – a key duality in the series' mythology – feel conversational, considerably enhancing the moodiness of interior spaces. Tastefully applied particle effects create yet another layer of visual interest, raising the dynamism of environments without seeming distracting or ostentatious. Tufts of foliage bristle and bend at the hero's feet in response to a stern breeze. Everything about what we're seeing reinforces the impression that you'll struggle to find a static frame in *Dark Souls II*. While Lordran arrayed itself in cadaverous quiet, this time the EKG needle seems to twitch relentlessly, drawing tiny scribbles even between set-piece spikes.

The character animations of the armour-clad knight are lithe and organic, with a silky responsiveness to each input of the controls. After speaking at a broad conceptual level about the game's direction for most of today's visit, this is the first moment in which our enthusiasm finally has a chance to snap its tether and leap the corral fence. Even at this nascent stage of production, it's obvious that Namco Bandai is going all in with its investment in *Dark Souls II*, lumping unprecedented resources behind it.

Allow us, then, to summon you into our world as we step through the fog gate of *Dark Souls II*. What you learn may take you through an emotional cycle similar to what you will have experienced if you've played *Demon's Souls* or *Dark Souls*. By that we mean that not all the news will be welcome or reassuring, and not every quote from the game's designers will be lucid and forthcoming. But every adventure has its surprises and we have some tantalising details left in our inventory.

Format TBC
Publisher Namco Bandai
Developer FromSoftware
Release TBC

I. HEARTBREAK

Hidetaka Miyazaki, the godfather of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, is clicking his ballpoint pen repeatedly. He's sitting across the table from us, wearing his trademark casual navy blue jacket over a buttoned-down shirt. His hair looks slightly more dishevelled than usual, hanging noticeably limply across his forehead. The atmosphere in the room has grown suddenly charged. The virtuosic young Japanese game designer has dropped a bombshell.

"I will not be involved in the actual development of *Dark Souls II*," he says matter-of-factly. "I want to clarify that I will be a supervisor, not the actual director or producer."

This is a crushing revelation for any hardcore fan of *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, akin to a cinephile learning that Pulp Fiction 2 is in production, but that Quentin Tarantino isn't attached to the picture. The strong personal tie between Miyazaki and the two dark fantasy RPGs he's created to date has been well established. He explained to us in a previous interview, for instance, that the veil of ambiguity hovering over the *Souls* games grew out of his experiences as a child poring over western fantasy literature. Due to his patchy comprehension of English at the time, there were large chunks of each book he couldn't decipher, leaving him to fill in the details with his imagination. He set out to create that same sense of awe and bewilderment in his games, letting players fill in the gaps with their imagination instead of having every plot point and objective clearly articulated through in-game text or cutscenes.



ABOVE Hidetaka Miyazaki, creator, *Souls* series

So what does it mean that Miyazaki is a supervisor on *Dark Souls II*? When we first hear the word, we imagine him popping by at the end of every workday to check in on development and see how things are progressing, maybe even signing off on features and visual concepts as they're being prototyped – you know, supervising. In reality, his role is less involved and ongoing than the term 'supervisor' would suggest, having simply ensured things got started on solid footing before stepping aside. So what has he contributed to the project?

"I WILL NOT BE INVOLVED IN THE ACTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF DARK SOULS II," SAYS MIYAZAKI

For one thing, Miyazaki has insisted on setting the top-line level of *Dark Souls II*'s production schedule. "I'm aware that many fans were a little bit frustrated about *Dark Souls* in terms of the scheduling – more specifically speaking, about the patches that we've released," he says, alluding to the consequences of pushing *Dark Souls* out the door before it was 100 per cent polished. "I really regretted that, so I reviewed all those kinds of things that I worked on in *Dark Souls* to make sure that *Dark Souls II* is ready on time."

The second item that Miyazaki claims to have looked after is the transition from a peer-to-peer online system to server-based network play, which promises a markedly improved online experience.

Finally, he points to his role in assigning the pair of replacement game directors – Tomohiro Shibuya and Yui Tanimura – who have now assumed the reins of the *Souls* series. Both had previously worked on FromSoftware's mech-action series *Another Century*, which caters to the tastes of the local Japanese audience and isn't currently available abroad. (Coincidentally, Miyazaki worked on the mech-action *Armored Core* series before creating *Demon's Souls*, so it's not as big a leap from mech combat to the fantasy-RPG genre as you might expect.)

Though the discrepancy could well be attributed to a translation error, moments after stating that "there will be two directors for *Dark Souls II*, which I have secured myself", Miyazaki tacks on a correction after his introduction of Shibuya and Tanimura, saying "the decision about the new assignments was not made by me; it was made by FromSoftware and Namco Bandai as a whole". These competing statements make it hard to decipher whether Miyazaki wished to step away from the *Souls* series, or if he was asked to move aside by the company so that the IP could be steered in a fresh direction. When asked about his new full-time role, Miyazaki mentions that he's working on a new title as director, but when we ask if it's a new IP he simply laughs and replies, "Sorry, I can't answer that."

"It was a company decision," clarifies Namco Bandai producer **Takeshi Miyazoe**. "Miyazaki worked on *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*, but for the IP to evolve and provide a new experience within the *Dark Souls* world the new wind from directors Shibuya and Tanimura is key to providing players with [a] brand new *Dark Souls* experience. In order to maintain the expectations and satisfaction and the rewards that players experience, this was the

WELCOME TO HELL

There will inevitably be fans who regard the word 'accessibility' in relation to the *Dark Souls* series with knee-jerk revulsion, but one of the game's co-directors, Tomohiro Shibuya, sees an opportunity in the very opening moments of *Dark Souls II* to provide a warm welcome for new players. Though he claims what he's envisioning isn't a difficulty ramp or tutorial, he talks about limiting players' options for the very first portion of the game, making it simpler for them to understand the core gameplay concepts of this new *Dark Souls*. Then, after a certain amount of time has elapsed, there will apparently be an instance where players "will immediately feel the *Dark Souls* experience".



ABOVE **When Miyazaki sits down with *Dark Souls II*, it will be the first time he has played a game in the series without being its creative force. He tells us his hope is that it will be unpredictable, but avoids detailing specific things he'd like to see for fear of pressuring the development team**

right time to bring in the new characteristics and taste[s of the directors] for this series to continue on evolving."

While it's sad to see Miyazaki part ways with his fantasy-RPG series, it certainly makes sense from a company perspective to steer him towards a fresh title, especially if it does turn out to be something brand new. Apart from *Dark Souls*, Namco Bandai's recent attempts to develop memorable new properties have been largely unsuccessful. If there's any chance this proven young designer can cause lightning to strike twice, it makes sense to give him that opportunity. For his part, Miyazaki seems ready to access a different part of his psyche. In response to an unrelated question, he says, "sometimes I'd like to work on a warmer game – not necessarily casual, but warmer in terms of the atmosphere and the environment". It's the closest thing that we're given to a hint about the nature of his next project.

So how does Miyazaki feel about entrusting his baby to new parents? "I'm not one to restrict the potential that *Dark Souls* has by insisting that only I can work on the titles," he stresses. "I want new expressions. It's true that I'm sad about not being involved in the development of *Dark Souls II*, because I've worked on *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls'* development for the past five years. I really love those two titles; however, maybe this is the time to have new inspiration, so I'm fine about that. I'm looking forward to playing *Dark Souls II* not as part of the development team, but with a little bit of distance. Everybody knows what the core of *Dark Souls* is – the dev team does, the fans do, the media does – and that will never change. I [wouldn't] really care for *Dark Souls VIII* to come out. That's not the point. It's more, 'What do the fans want?' We want to stay true to what they expect."

At the conclusion of our interview, Miyazaki volunteers some formal closing remarks. He mentions this will probably be one of his last interviews about the *Souls* series for a while and wants to offer his appreciation on behalf of himself and the development team to fans and the media for lavishing such enthusiastic praise on *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls*. As he exits the room, the reality sinks in – this is really happening. We've been taught that if the Fire Keeper dies, the bonfire they guard turns to cold ash. Let's hope this is the exception. *Dark Souls II* has the potential to be a dramatic departure indeed. ●

RIGHT While the images on this spread are based on in-game models, they are in fact pre-rendered. What we saw demoed did not quite achieve this striking a level of hyper-realism, but it came tantalisingly close





ABOVE According to Shibuya, the player's ability to parse the meaning behind subtle hints or clues in the game's environment will "determine the difficulty of the game and the challenges that are available for them to experience"





ABOVE Even though this sequel will be roughly the same size as its predecessor, the world will be more densely populated with specific points of interest. RIGHT The notion that the *Dark Souls* series needs to evolve is a theme emphasised a number of times in our conversations with both FromSoftware and Namco Bandai. Don't expect a minor update





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LEFT *Dark Souls II* will once again be staged in a seamless open world full of dangers, but Shibuya also plans to weave in elements that "will help to guide the player". BELOW Though Namco Bandai isn't yet ready to confirm plans for a PC release of *Dark Souls II*, there was an unmistakably wink-wink quality to how we were told "we're not denying it either". Our demo was also running on a high-end laptop







LEFT In designing map areas for *Dark Souls II*, the main creative principle is to dream up concepts that did not exist in the previous games. MIDDLE One general idea the *Dark Souls II* team has for increasing accessibility is to implement a system that will enable you to easily review the clues and hints you've seen earlier on in the game

II. FRUSTRATION

One half of the directorial duo behind *Dark Souls II*, **Tomohiro Shibuya** clearly has more than a passing interest in fashion. He sports stylishly layered hair, his jeans are ornamented with faux-stencilled graffiti, and the shirt he's got on displays a black-and-white photograph of a woman reclining on a sofa while wearing nothing but black gloves. One arm conceals her breasts, while a strategically positioned cushion keeps the image just softcore enough to ensure it remains tantalising without being pornographic. The composition of the photo is designed to tease viewers, and to kindle their curiosity.

Shibuya is here to try to accomplish the same trick with *Dark Souls II*, but it becomes quickly apparent that he doesn't intend to be nearly as forthcoming as the woman on his shirt. She's opted for black gloves, but he might as well be cloaked in the Tower Knight's daunting plate armour.

His initial flurry of answers are vague. We're able to establish that *Dark Souls II* will be a direct sequel to *Dark Souls*, and it will take place in an open world of similar dimensions to its predecessor but more dense with content. The game will not take place in Lordran, yet Shibuya won't disclose the name of the setting. "The name of the world will be key to the story," he says. "We will reveal it eventually, but not in the first announcement. If Lordran was to be an area in a world called, say, Earth, the setting of this game will be somewhere completely different. The two places won't necessarily interact directly with each other, but, from a visual concept [standpoint] at least, it will be within the same world."



ABOVE Tomohiro Shibuya, co-game director, *Dark Souls II*

We're told the story will once again revolve around a character who is cursed and seeking to find the cure for his affliction, but Shibuya won't be drawn out further. He will provide no details about how much continuity there is between the story of *Dark Souls II* and its predecessor, nor explain why the player has appeared in this new region. "They'll find out right away," he says, "but that's something we want to refrain from speaking too much about today."

In the preceding interview, Miyazaki stressed that FromSoftware was interested in evolving the series to keep fans surprised and engaged. So if the key alteration from *Demon's Souls* to *Dark Souls* was providing players with an expansive and seamless open world, what's the defining change that *Dark Souls II* will offer us?

"The concept of time and the existence of time is something that will be key to *Dark Souls II*," replies Shibuya. When we press for more detail, he simply rephrases the word 'time' with 'eras' and leaves it there. That's as much as he will say, claiming that he doesn't want to spoil the surprise for players. We'll have to wait to see just what this clue means, then, but it sounds as though time travel between different epochs of the world's history could play a role in the game. For a series that already shares so much DNA with *The Legend Of Zelda*, playing with time mechanics can only serve to strengthen that bond.

Any sequel in a beloved franchise gets stuck between the competing values of preserving the core of an experience that players have loved and the desire to offer up fresh enticements. Despite his caginess, Shibuya doesn't intend to be shy about building on the foundation of the past games and changing things up.

"Ideally we want *Dark Souls* players to smoothly get into *Dark Souls II*," he explains, "but at the same time I am implementing a lot of different aspects as well. So there might be a sense of awkwardness at the [beginning] when experienced *Dark Souls* players pick up *Dark Souls II*. But ideally we want that smooth process, so *Dark Souls II* will have the same general feel in terms of the experience in the game. I don't intend to change the controls."

Our conversation then turns to the issue of accessibility. *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* are notorious for not just being difficult to master in a mechanical sense, but remaining staunchly inscrutable as well; the games rarely explain their systems to players. *Demon's Souls* contained a feature called World Tendency that veered between pure white and pure black, changing the nature of the

Q & A TOMOHIRO SHIBUYA, CO-GAME DIRECTOR, *DARK SOULS II*

One of the only things that broke the spell of immersion in *Dark Souls* was the framerate drops. What steps have you taken to enhance the technical performance of *Dark Souls II*?
Obviously, we'll do our best to maintain framerate. That was a heartbreaker for some players out there. And obviously I will push my team to reach the upper standards of what is expected, but that's not going to be my top priority. If there's an instance in the game where I really want to surprise or come out with a big strong bang to players, and as a result the framerate drops, I still want to try to reach for that emotional satisfaction the player receives, even if that does mean some technical issues.

Can you give us an idea of the new kinds of challenges that players will experience in *Dark Souls II*?
It's hard to come up with a direct example, but I'll offer an analogy. If you're in the dark, your mind is always thinking, 'What's going to jump out at me? What's lurking in the dark?' But we want to go a step further into looking really closely at the darkness and finding messages or hints that might be written there. That's the sort of challenge that we want players to be able to face. Not just the straightforward intent or message that you get from what you see, but thinking behind that, thinking further into what each situation actually means, and what can exist in the environments that you are in.

Being a newcomer to the *Souls* series, what unique creative inspiration and experience do you think that you will bring to *Dark Souls II*?
So one aspect is that because I've worked on a lot of action games in the past before coming to this title, that is one part I feel that I am able to grow on in terms of the action that is involved in the game, whether it be motions or the combat system. The action is something that I want to enhance in the game.

world depending on certain actions, but you had to flee online to the *Demon's Souls* wiki if you were to have any hope of untangling the mystery of how it worked. *Dark Souls* has a host of different 'covenants', which require different actions from players to both join and maintain good standing in. The covenant system will return in *Dark Souls II*, but Shibuya assures us it will be easier to understand.

"I personally feel that the covenant system was something that was difficult to fully absorb and experience [in] *Dark Souls*, and I intend to make it more accessible to players. And that's not just with the covenant system, but with a lot of other aspects that I felt were difficult to fully adapt to.

"I will follow the same concept as *Dark Souls*, but there were a lot of hidden story elements that some players may not have caught before, and I'm hoping to make some of that a little bit more clear or directly expressed to the player as well – not just in the story, but messaging. A lot of elements were very subtle in *Dark Souls*, and that was something that was characteristic to *Dark Souls*. But I personally am the sort of person who likes to be more direct instead of subtle, so I think that part of me will [result in] a difference [for] players when they pick up *Dark Souls II*. It will be more straightforward and more understandable."

> "I INTEND TO MAKE IT MORE ACCESSIBLE TO PLAYERS. AND THAT'S NOT JUST THE COVENANTS"

Despite Miyazaki telling us in an interview conducted back in November 2011 that he wasn't yet sure if he'd have the chance to make a follow-up to *Dark Souls*, *Dark Souls II* had in fact already been in development for two months at that stage. Shibuya mentions being approached about the project in September of last year, at which point, we're told, development was proceeding in parallel, with some of the *Dark Souls* team working on patches and DLC content, and staff gradually migrating over to the new game as required.

According to Shibuya, the team working on *Dark Souls II* is "substantially bigger". Though he won't quantify the growth numerically, he points out that the studio has nearly doubled the internal team focused on world creation alone, in addition to adding new members across every other department. When asked what state the game is currently in, he estimates it being roughly 25 per cent finished. In other words, if the current pace of development holds, you can almost definitely rule out the game arriving in 2013. Is the team hoping to finish the game before the end of the current hardware generation? Shibuya politely declines to comment.

After about 90 minutes of question-and-answer jousting, we haven't teased out many specifics. It's just like *Dark Souls* to raise more questions than it answers, but we can't help feeling frustrated. Diehard fans of the series will surely be disappointed as well. But it's also just like *Dark Souls* to provide players with dizzying turnabouts in fortune. After stumbling blind and hopeless through the pitch black Tomb Of The Giants in *Dark Souls*, stumbling upon that first bonfire near the base of the tall cliff-face ladder felt like reaching pure nirvana. In a cavern that dark, the illumination from even a tiny bonfire can feel as penetrating as the sun itself.



LEFT Shibuya wants to make sure that *Dark Souls II*'s opening "draws in players and gets them addicted right away without immediately making players feel rejected from the game system"

III.EUPHORIA

There are a number of glossy printouts of *Dark Souls II* concept art lying on the table between us and Shibuya – the same images you'll find illustrating this feature. With the formal interview concluded and our final minutes ticking away, we make one last push for information. Would Shibuya kindly give us a guided tour of the concept art before us so that we know what we're looking at?

He lays his index finger on the **knight dressed in a regal coat of blue and grey armour (1).** This is the main hero, he says. We point out the grey animal fur adorning the shoulders of the armour and recount a conversation we had with Miyazaki months ago about the *Dark Souls* team experimenting with – and later abandoning – snowy terrain because it was too technically demanding.

"We're not really thinking of anything to take place covered in snow or blizzards or stuff like that," explains Shibuya. "But the aspect of snow and weather is something that we're definitely looking into and thinking about implementing, so that this actually makes sense as well." The idea of dynamic weather in a *Dark Souls* game is enticing. Can you imagine how much more evocative the mood of, say, Darkroot Garden would have been if a misty rain began pattering on the grassy turf as you traced a path in the dark between those incandescent flower blossoms?

Shibuya points out a **curious-looking weapon (2)** that's been designed for the game, which looks like a statue sitting on an upside down dome pedestal, and explains that it's actually a bell with a thin dagger tip on the end. Ringing the two Bells Of Awakening in *Dark Souls* marked key moments of the player's progression through the game. We'll have to wait to see if this bell has any connection to those ones, or if it's simply an answer to the question, 'Hey, you know what would be cool?'

Next up is a **panoramic sketch of ruins near a misty coastline (3).** "This is something new that we're trying to do. Using the ocean or the sea as a concept, that hadn't really been [done] in *Demon's Souls* or *Dark Souls*. The ocean aspect is something that we're newly implementing into the game, so one of the concept artists started on this for us to use. With the ocean or the sea as a concept, the aspects that are involved are strong winds from the ocean [and] the strong waves as well. This is an area where we're trying to express loneliness. In Japan, it's an iconic idea that when you're standing by the sea all alone, you're often depressed."



Shibuya moves on to a **grotesquely obese enemy wielding massive crescent-shaped sickles (4).** Though he said earlier he wouldn't be talking about any characters in the new game, he makes an exception. He explains that there's a mad scientist in the world, and that this creature is the product of a Frankenstein-like experiment in which he reanimated a corpse containing the parts of various powerful creatures. A separate image of what looks like a **dwarf wielding a monstrous axe (5)** isn't necessarily a dwarf, Shibuya points out, but it is a character that lives underground.

Another enemy that **looks like a spider mutant (6)** has a far more disturbing explanation. The spider has actually attached itself parasitically to the being's back and is controlling its movements. The hairy leg piercing the host's cranium allegedly manipulates his brain in some way. Curiously, one of the relatively pedestrian-looking enemies on display, **a blind, bandaged zombie with a gaping open rib cage (7),** who seems a little like something out of a *Resident Evil* game, cannot be discussed at all. Shibuya simply informs us "This is top secret."

The **black rider in the chariot (8),** who looks like one of Tolkien's Nazgûl, is in fact an undead who acts as an executioner if you commit evil deeds. So does this mean there will be some kind of moral system underpinning *Dark Souls II*? "Yes, definitely," Shibuya confirms with a grin. "If you're unlucky enough, you'll be able to meet them."

The undead executioner's chariot also points to another feature that hasn't been explored in the series previously: vehicles. The player's vulnerability in *Demon's Souls* and *Dark Souls* was reinforced by the lack of vehicular assistance. You were always the footsoldier on the front lines wading into certain death, never the horseback cavalry charging in with the upper hand. Shibuya describes vehicles as something the team wants to implement in *Dark Souls II* as a new element for players. "We want to constantly think of something new that hasn't been tried before, so that's where that idea [of the chariot] came up."

Having alighted on the subject of vehicles, we draw his attention back to the coastal concept art and ask about boats, one of the fantasy genre's most familiar modes of transport. "Being on a ship or boat is definitely something we are considering," he says, "but being able to control one is not in the works."

No letdown there, as many other delights clearly are in the works. Prepare to die – of anticipation. ■



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B O R N

A G A I N

The developers behind the current wave of reboots tell us about the graft and nous that go into reviving an old classic

What do you do with a property that has been misused, run into the ground, or simply left on the shelf for too long? Following the trends of cinema, increasingly developers are turning to the reboot, aiming to isolate what once made a game or series great and deliver on that expectation with a contemporary approach. And with many series still going some 20 years after their debuts, several are mature enough for radical revisions.

"People understand reimagining a franchise," says **Karl Stewart**, global brand director at Crystal Dynamics. "They know what you mean when you go back and say, 'Here's an icon – this is what it stood for. We're not changing the heritage of it, but we are going to make it fresh and reimagine it for today's culture.'" Stewart is a principal force behind the creation and marketing of the forthcoming *Tomb Raider*, which has both impressed fans and drawn criticism as it aims to reshape Lara Croft and her adventures, so he knows the challenges of the process.

XCOM: Enemy Unknown (2012) and *Mortal Kombat* (2011) are prime examples of such reimaginings – they show what's possible when an accumulated malaise is cast aside and new ideas and technology are used to take a fresh crack at a once-brilliant template. But how do creators even get to the point of calculated rebirth?

When Crystal Dynamics was enlisted to give *Tomb Raider* a lift after Core Design's *Tomb Raider: The Angel Of Darkness* for PlayStation 2 was poorly received by critics, its mandate was to modernise the brand. The studio did so with 2006's *Tomb Raider: Legend*, which shed the rigid controls and navigation of previous entries, and delivered a more cinematic adventure. But, as Stewart concedes, these tweaks improved *Tomb Raider* just enough to keep it alive after years of minimal iteration: "We just continued the cycle. We made it relevant for that generation of consoles."

After 2008's *Tomb Raider: Underworld*, the studio took a hard look at the series and didn't fancy its chances. "[We asked], 'Can *Tomb Raider* sustain itself for the next ten to 15 years as a franchise?' And we really felt that, no, it couldn't," Stewart admits. *Tomb Raider* hadn't progressed much over the years, nor had it evolved to match changing tastes; Crystal's games only made short-term fixes to an ageing formula.

Rebooting *Tomb Raider* meant digging into the essence of what made the series connect with players and then building around those central elements by looping in new ideas. That necessitated shedding its heroine's increasingly larger-than-life disposition, which had been built up by games and film adaptations alike. Stewart explains the team's philosophy: "If we're going to set the foundations for the next 15 years, we need to reimagine it and reboot it in a way that feels like people can understand who she is as a personality, and not just as the girl with big shiny guns who came onto the scene in 1996 looking the way she did."

For Firaxis Games, deciding to reboot *XCOM* was more a matter of timing, both in regards to the series itself, which hadn't generated a new release in over a decade, and for the man who would be a key driving force behind the project, **Jake Solomon**. Now Firaxis's lead designer, he was inspired to create games at a young age by 1994's *UFO: Enemy Unknown*, the first game in the series. However, when he conceived an exploratory prototype of a remake back in 2003, the pieces didn't click as expected.

"[The '03 XCOM remake] was awful. It's a good thing it never went ahead – I was way too young"

"It was awful," claims Solomon. "It's a good thing it never went ahead, because I was way too young, I had very little experience, and I just wasn't in the right place to make that game. It really took a long time until it made sense for the team and for the company."

It took until 2008, in fact. Solomon – having accumulated years of experience working under Sid Meier, as well as achieving senior status – seized the opportunity to push another revival attempt when the team was seeking a new project. But what became 2012's *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* did not begin life as a reboot; it was initially intended as an upgrade. "We were going to remake the original game, with the original game mechanics, and we were going to add a couple of things to it," explains Soloman.

For 2011's *Mortal Kombat* reboot, meanwhile, the intention was not to mimic the exact approach of the early '90s entries, but rather to recapture the sensational violence that made them so beloved. The series had strayed from that template over time, first moving to 3D combat and then later watering down the gore and fatalities for *Mortal Kombat Vs DC Universe*. Looping in familiar comic heroes and villains was a new twist, but it came at the expense of some of the adult content fans enjoyed – a restraint that came from the DC licence.

The fan reaction prepared the ground for going back to basics, albeit with modern touches. "It was the prime opportunity to return to everything that made *Mortal* ➋



Q&A: JAKE SOLOMON, LEAD DESIGNER, FIRAXIS

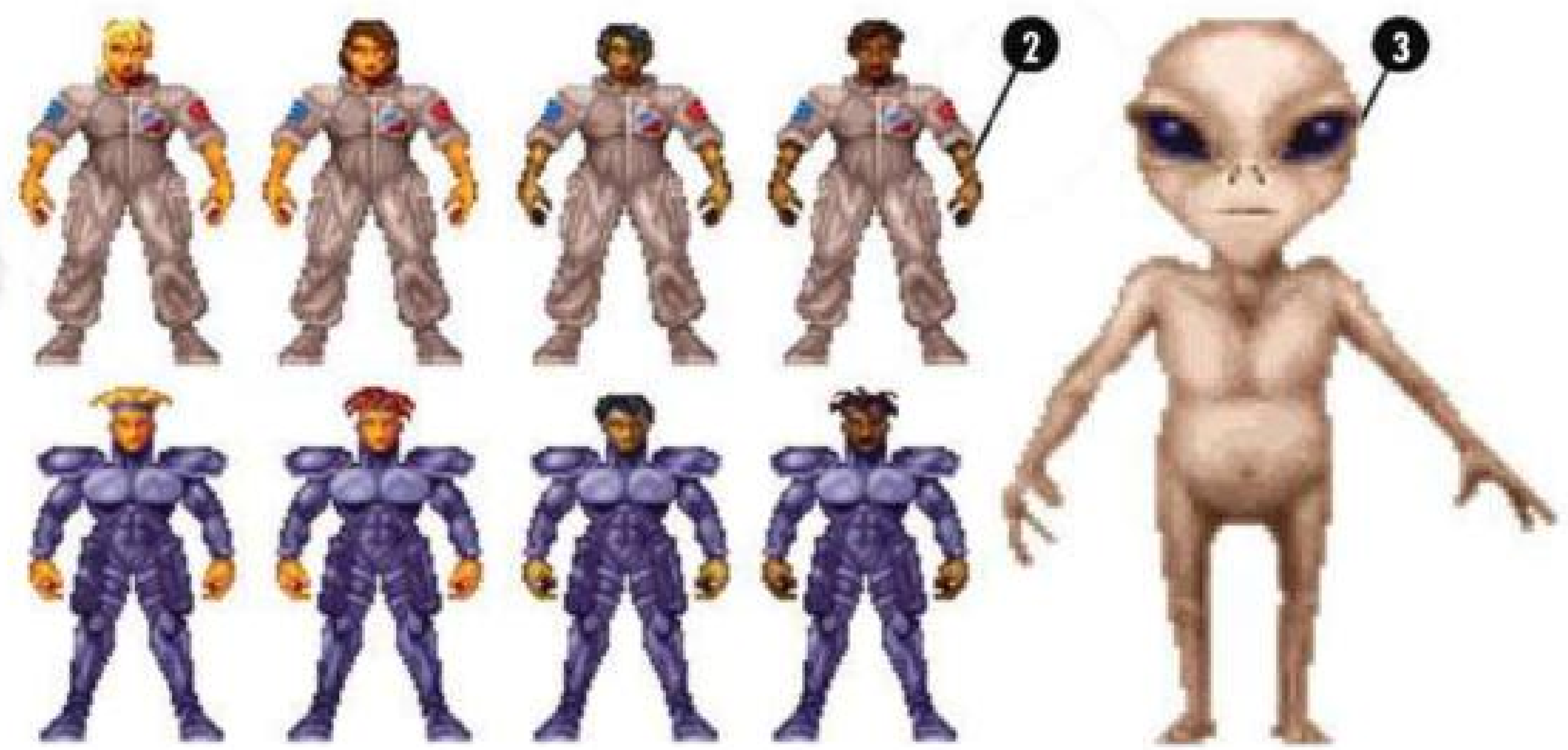
How did it feel to come into this project as a fan of the original and have to take a cold, hard look at what worked and what didn't?

When I design my own systems and people are like "I didn't like that idea" or "That wasn't fun", I'll say, "That's fine. Tell me what you didn't like and I'll change it." I get that from Sid Meier, who is very much like that…

When it came to the original game, it was one of those things where it wasn't my design and I was extremely nostalgi out it. So when people would criticise elements of the original game, I was basically blind to the criticism. The designer side of me shut down, and the fanboy stepped in. I'd be like, "Well, you don't get it," which is something that I would never say as a designer. You can't say that as a designer. If somebody doesn't get it, that means there's something fucking wrong with your design. But when people would criticise the mechanics of the original game, I would get a little defensive.

It was hard for me to be a designer about elements that I didn't design and felt nostalgic about. At the end of the day, that's what I realised: that I probably held on a little tightly to some of those things.







❶ Armour progression is one part of empowering the player in Firaxis's *XCOM*. This concept art depicts troopers wearing bulkier suits than those in-game. ❷ By contrast, here are the character models for 1994's *UFO: Enemy Unknown* in basic coveralls (above), and personal armour (below). ❸ Sectoids riff off the well-known 'greys' of UFO lore, whose aesthetic permeates both the 1994 original and its reboot. ❹ Laser weaponry is your first step towards parity with the alien forces' firepower in the reboot, mirroring the tech progression of the original. ❺ Although the concept of multiple bases was jettisoned by Firaxis, you do build hangers abroad to increase air coverage





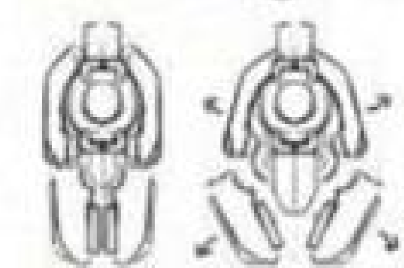


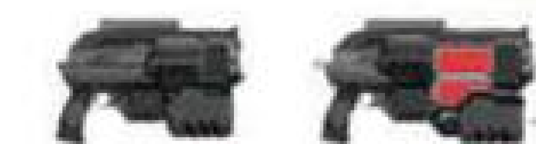
































Kombat [what it is]," asserts **Ed Boon**, series co-creator and a creative director at NetherRealm Studios. "We thought it was time to reset the clock."

Deciding which elements are intrinsic to the game experience is a key first step for any reboot. In the case of *XCOM*, Firaxis initially hewed too closely to the template that made the 1994 original a strategy classic. After a year of hard work, a completed vertical slice of the game impressed old fans, but it ended up alienating everyone else.

"The original had incredibly high highs – maybe even higher highs than our game today has," concedes Solomon. "But the cost of those incredibly high highs was that it also had some serious lows to it, like the pacing and combat." Attempting to layer new elements upon questionable older ones only exacerbated the problems with those dated mechanics. Initially crushed by the result, but ultimately emboldened, the team decided to forge a new path. "We had to identify those things that make a game *XCOM*, and it's very hard to do with a game that's so big and emergent, and has all these complex systems in it."

Instead of holding tight to the original mechanics, Firaxis aimed to pin down the pieces that made the series stand out in its genre. Turn-based combat with permanent death was essential, as were destructible levels and a deep strategic layer baked into the action. In addition, lead artist **Greg Foertsch** notes that, like the original, Firaxis's *Enemy Unknown* also rooted its aesthetic in classic UFO lore. Isolating and updating these elements allowed the studio to begin experimenting with other mechanics, enabling it to follow its own vision for the series.

In the early days of its *Tomb Raider* reboot, Crystal Dynamics was open to nearly anything when it came to reshaping Lara's world – perhaps too much. "We at first pushed everything aside," notes Stewart. His team then looked to other popular games, films, and books for inspiration. "Before we knew it, we actually ended up with this strange cauldron of all these different parts of games. [And we thought,] 'It doesn't look or feel like our game.'"

At one point during development, Croft was charged with protecting a young girl left alone on the island; elsewhere, she would care for a horse that could shepherd her around. Both took away from what the team saw as the most essential facet of the game: "*Tomb Raider* has always been built for the player to play it alone – live the world with Lara Croft," explains Stewart. "It's a very isolated experience. We started to dilute that by bringing in all of these other things."

Drilling down into what Stewart calls the core pillars of the game – combat, exploration, and puzzle solving – got the studio back on track. It wanted to redefine each element's place in the series, however, and develop new systems and techniques around those concepts. Most important of all was striking a new tone for Lara Croft. For that, Crystal brought in writer **Rhianna Pratchett**, who previously helped bring the heroines of *Mirror's Edge* and *Heavenly Sword* to life. "We really wanted to go back to a time when she didn't have all the answers, the clever lines and the guns, and she was more human and relatable," she explains.

Doing so meant losing Lara's trademark swagger and instead recasting her as a younger woman on her first adventure, facing real terror after the vessel she's chartered crashes on a mysterious island. It also required shedding the past image of Lara as a buxom sex symbol – something that Pratchett claims fuelled her own love/hate relationship with the heroine over the years. Pratchett's outsider perspective on Lara made her an ideal candidate to help shake the *Tomb Raider* series from its holding pattern.

"We really wanted to go back to a time when [Lara] didn't have all the answers, the clever lines and the guns"

Balancing that fine line of honouring what players loved about a game while charting a new path forward is one of the most difficult tasks a developer faces when tackling a reboot. "Delivering on the player's memories" is how WayForward's **Sean Velasco** puts it, having directed September 2012's *Double Dragon Neon* and worked on the vibrant *A Boy And His Blob* reboot. "Instead of remaking the game identically, what you're doing is delivering a game experience that's what players remember as their experience [of a game]…"

In essence, he believes that developers should aim to capture the little moments and quirks of the source material in order to help the rebooted game hit familiar notes for players. But for *Double Dragon Neon*, even charting a coherent direction for the game was difficult due to the wide array of past franchise incarnations. "If you look at the history of *Double Dragon*, there are so many games and the tones are all over the map, plus there's been a cartoon show and a film," he explains. "Each of them is pretty different from one another, so we just looked at everything."

With regards to *Mortal Kombat*, Boon shares a somewhat similar sentiment to Velasco, at least in terms of not simply replicating classic features.



Q&A: HIDEAKI ITSUNO CREATIVE DIRECTOR, CAPCOM

Did you recognise that there would be a Ninja Theory audience as well as a *Devil May Cry* one for *DmC*? How did you approach that?
Obviously, it was something that we consciously wanted to do, because otherwise there would have been no point in coming to Ninja Theory for the new *DmC*. And it wasn't a case of us making them make *DmC*; we wanted the *DmC* that they would make. So it was more of a process of working together with them, and giving them advice and details on what we thought was necessary for them to do that. And also respecting what they wanted to do and letting them do that.















❶ Alessandro 'Talexi' Taini's concept art for *DmC* has drawn a lot of flak from those who dislike the radical redesign of Dante, going to show that not every fan will be happy to see a familiar series reimagined. Developer Ninja Theory has the full support of Capcom, however, and it has been advising the British studio on how to make its take on the demon hunter feel fluid and satisfying.
❷ Here's Dante as he appeared in the first *Devil May Cry* – the epitome of anime-style cool.
❸ *DMC2* was criticised for presenting less of a challenge, and for its samey weaponry.
❹ Arguably the series' high point, *DMC3* is one benchmark against which *DmC* will be judged.
❺ *DMC4* mostly took players out of Dante's trademark red coat, casting them instead as the largely charisma-free Nero, which was regarded as a serious misstep







"It's a combination of [re]introducing a feature [players] have fond memories of, and not just implementing it exactly as they remember it," he explains. "Because the real thing never lives up to your memories. You always have to one up it." For his reboot, doing so meant crafting a combat system with greater depth and adding even more flair to its gruesome Fatalities, as well as delivering a lengthy film-like story mode.

At least part of a reboot is about moving with the times. Take Nintendo's *Kid Icarus: Uprising*, which is one of the more remarkable reboots in recent memory due to the series' lengthy spell off the market – an amazing 20 years since *Kid Icarus: Of Myths And Monsters*. In this time, handheld devices have morphed from the Game Boy to the 3DS. Such a change demanded a dramatic overhaul in both aesthetic and gameplay approach, which director **Masahiro Sakurai** says is paramount, but he also ensured that the game never lost the lingering essence of its heritage.

"I prioritise whether the game can provide a new and fulfilling experience that fits well with the times over recreating the older games," says Sakurai. "The original *Kid Icarus* game was a very comical game. At a time when Link and Samus were on their serious adventures [in 1986], this game had a bit of humour. Therefore, we have not made the tone of the [reboot] a serious one, where the main character is going through arduous tasks, but instead we have a game where you make light banter while you battle your way through."

"At a time when Link and Samus were on their serious adventures, [Kid Icarus] had a bit of humour"

The frenzied shooting sequences of *Uprising* alone would have set it apart, but the fully voice-acted exchanges between the game's hero, Pit, and his allies and enemies also contribute to its distinctive character. Such an approach successfully bridged the gap between the modern gameplay and source material, and managed to appease longterm fans.

A healthy dose of scepticism from the public should be expected when developers seek to offer a fresh slant on a much-loved character or series, though. And, if Ninja Theory's announcement of *DmC: Devil May Cry* is any indication, the reaction of some fans to a dramatic reimagining could even be explosive. The British studio's early reveals for its take on the venerable series – due in 2013 – were subjected to ire because they presented an extreme makeover for brash lead Dante, who loses his white moptop in favour of short black hair. Paired with a more gaunt demeanour and revised clothing, this new look has sent some die-hards into hysterics.

Pratchett and her colleagues have likewise dealt with vocal aficionados. "Some have talked about how we've 'broken down' Lara. That's really not the case," she says. "We've not taken away what's already there, we've just taken her back to a point where she didn't realise it was there." Ultimately, though, Pratchett knows that such a project will not please all fans, especially those who revel in the minutiae. "You always have to make choices along the way, but it's amazing how detailed fans can get."

Solomon understands that the strong feelings that follow a game like *XCOM* are all just part of the reboot process. "When Peter Jackson makes The Lord Of The Rings, there are people out there who feel incredibly strongly about it, and there's almost no good way to tell people, 'I made this change to the thing you love so much,'" he admits. "But there's also no way to remake that original game nowadays and have it be a success on the level that it has to be."

As the years progress, so do tastes, and older concepts and mechanics often can't deliver the same impact they once did. What usually don't age at the same rate are the fond memories that players have of their past experiences. Solomon says his own status as a fan of the source material – who came to understand its weaknesses – made it much easier to connect with *XCOM* fans and get to the heart of their concerns. "It was nice to have that conversation with fans, and that helped a lot of times to win people over and explain the ideas in an honest, no bullshit way."

Of course, it's easy to get reboots wrong as well. Intelligent fans can sense a half-hearted or misguided attempt from miles away. Developers being honest about their direction and intentions is essential, but that won't be effective if the extent of a reboot's vision is simply to profit from lingering nostalgia, or to haphazardly affix an existing property to a genre or aesthetic that's in vogue.

Yet rebooting a game also seems like it can be an essential part of a series' evolutionary process. As a selection of recent games have shown, audiences react when a classic's intrinsic, defining elements are treated as a starting point toward unknown creative destinations, and it's exciting for gamers when fresh new function is coaxed from dusty but treasured parts. This is the reboot done right: an opportunity to refine and grow a game around time-honoured concepts, rather than developers feeling mired in fatigued ideas. ■



MASAHIRO SAKURAI, DIRECTOR OF SOFTWARE DEVELOPMENT AT PROJECT SORA

"The original *Kid Icarus* is a game from 26 years ago now, as no sequels came out in Japan. Players who were 10 at the time may well have a kid of their own now at the same age as [they were] back then. If we look at it that way, we can think of it as there being a new generation of gamers. The spirit of the original *Kid Icarus* is expressed [in *Uprising*] through the story, music, and some of the characters like the Reapers and the bosses. We have aimed to build a game that can stand on its own."





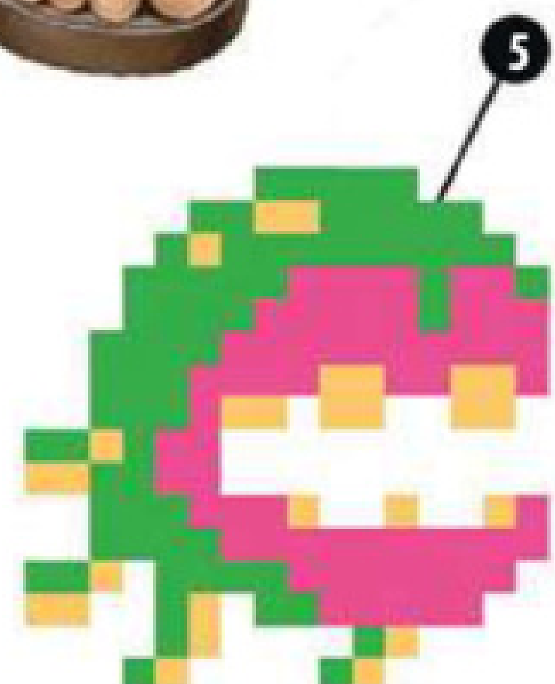


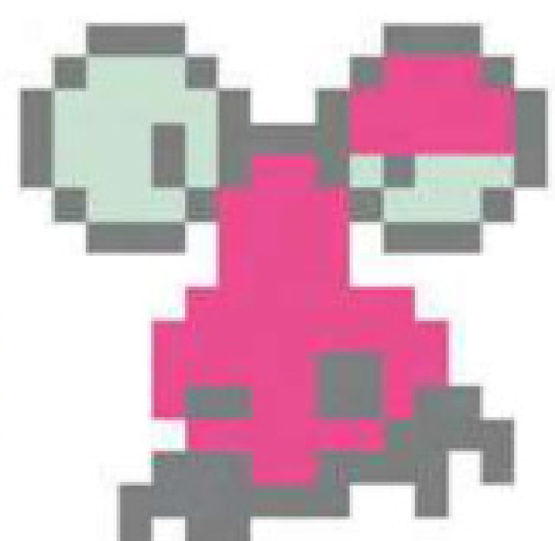
❶ The lighter tone of Pit's latest adventure also extends to its menagerie of enemy types and creatures.
❷ Pit's look in *Uprising* is very similar to the redesign he received for 2008's *Super Smash Bros Brawl*.
❸ *Uprising* was praised for its brand new and extensive weapon system, which tied into levels made to be replayed with new gear.
❹ Human warrior Magnus provides a counterpoint for the bright, colourful designs that saturate Pit's world.
❺ Many of the enemies in *Uprising* are direct updates of their 8bit forms, showing how far visual design has come in the last 20 years







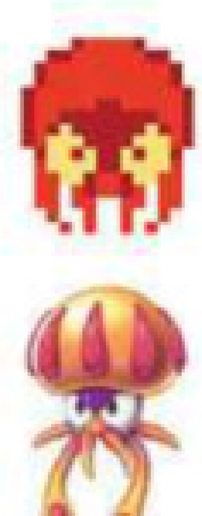
















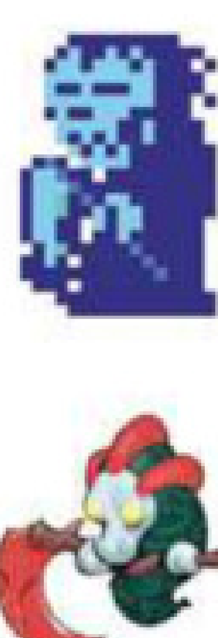








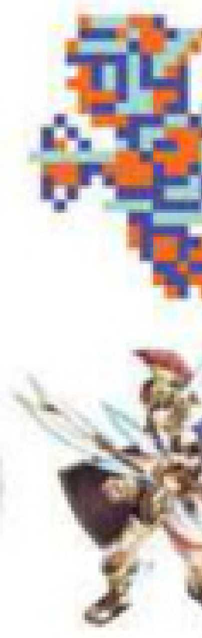


















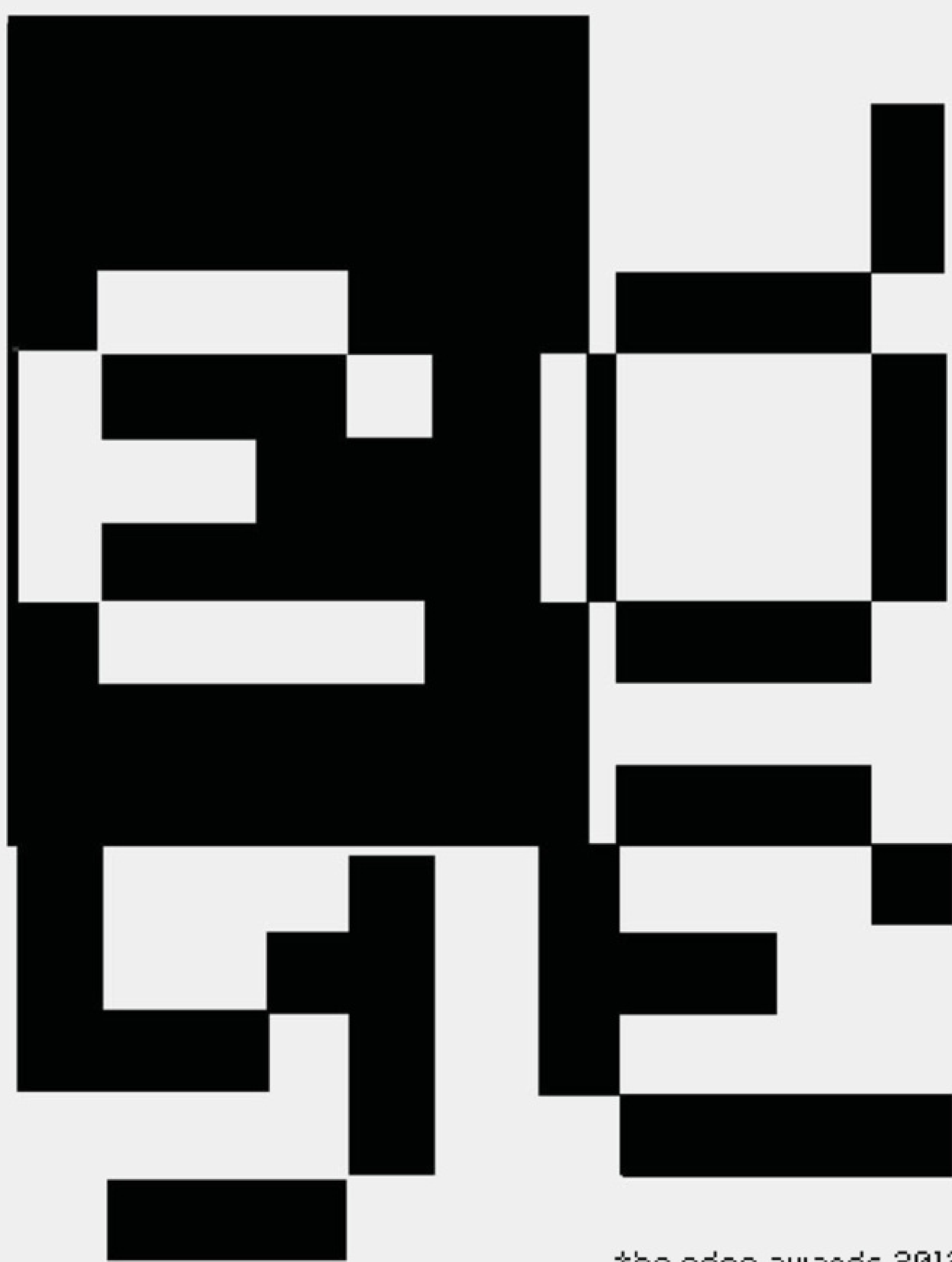












the edge awards 2012

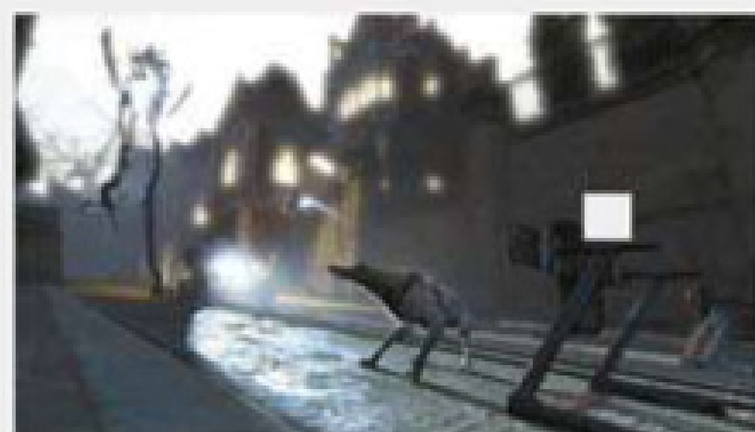
It's been a strange year. In many ways, at least for the mainstream, 2012 could be seen as the year the industry adopted a holding pattern, with the next generation a heartbeat away. There's a sense of the biggest players catching their breath and cautiously waiting as they watch Kickstarter circumventing them, social games appear to falter, and fortunes being won and lost faster than they can keep up with.

It's also been a year of looking back to older generations. Storied developers offered to remake their past glories, and publishers plundered their dustiest IPs and design philosophies. In the cases of *XCOM: Enemy Unknown* and *Dishonored* – the latter looking back to *Thief* and *Deus Ex* – the results were fortune and glory. But it's also been a year of diminishing returns, of heavy investment in sequels such as *Halo 4* and *Assassin's Creed III* that, despite wealths of polish and content, didn't have the same impact as their beloved forebears.

Then there were the indies, and 2012 was their year. The wild range of new styles and forms they've yielded has been extraordinary, exhibiting vast ambition and a quality of execution that has seen such games bearing at least the same significance as the products of the mainstream industry. Videogames as a whole have been made profoundly richer as a result.

B E S T   G A M E

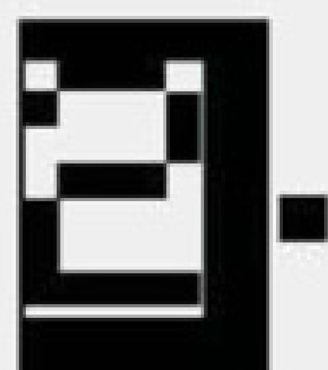




Dishonored

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Bethesda **Developer** Arkane Studios

It's impossible to celebrate *Dishonored* without appreciating the world in which it's set. Dunwall is lavishly built, with visual imagination attending to every tiny detail and expansive vista, and level design that always presents you with interesting choices and meaningful consequences. It's populated with unforgettably grotesque characters and a sense of their unnerving culture. Its melancholy score hangs in the air like the smog in its streets, and it's all articulated by Corvo's fluid controls. Every part of *Dishonored* works in exquisite concert, every system complementing the others with a graceful cohesion that speaks of Corvo himself, and of the generosity in freedom and participation *Dishonored* extends to its players. Few games burst as fully formed from the ether – perhaps Dunwall's most remarkable achievement is that it feels so inevitable.



Spelunky

Format 360 **Publisher** Mossmouth **Developer** In-house

Derek Yu's thrilling adventure-platformer, inspired by the ophiophobian archaeologist, is both Indie and indie. Its randomly generated levels seem so tailored you can imagine the creator rubber-stamping each one as it tumbles from the production line, while its challenging difficulty makes every inch of progress feel wrested from the white-knuckle grip of fate. An instant classic.

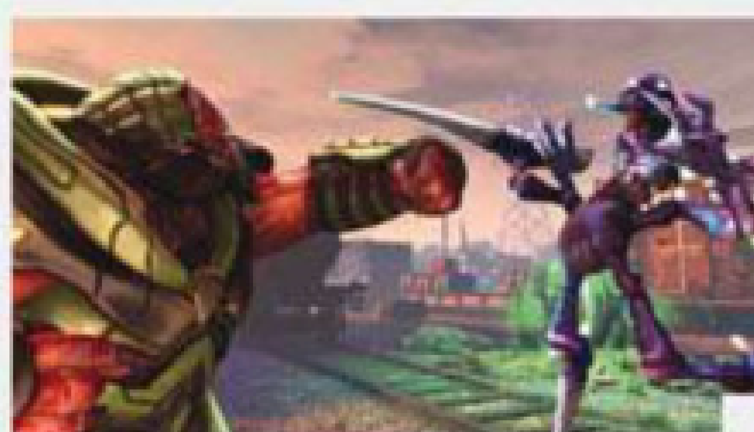




XCOM: Enemy Unknown

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** 2K **Developer** Firaxis

We hardly dared to believe it could be pulled off: a remake of one of the finest and yet most mechanically delicate strategy games of all time, with a gamepad-friendly control scheme layered on top to suit consoles as well as PC. Firaxis managed it, balancing a confident and reverent approach to streamlining a game that didn't seem improvable.



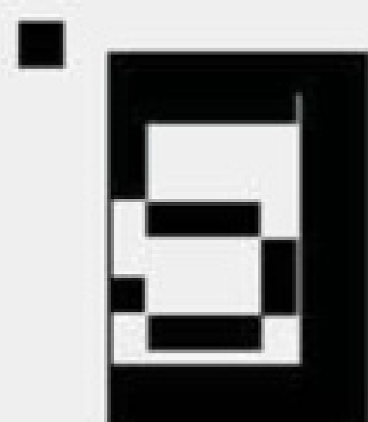


Trials Evolution

Format 360 **Publisher** Microsoft Studios **Developer** RedLynx

Having already refined one of gaming's finest vehicle handling models in *Trials HD*, RedLynx looked beyond the grimy warehouse windows to a world full of exquisitely crafted tracks, a raft of multiplayer modes and a level editor so flexible that you can almost forgive *Evolution* for its poorer minigame selection. The result? An XBLA game that breaks records.



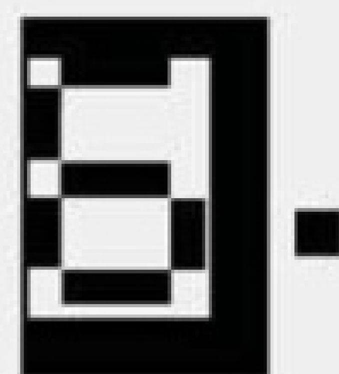


Super Hexagon

Format iOS **Publisher** Distractionware **Developer** In-house

The trick is to hit restart so quickly that all your failures and triumphs are woven into a seamless thread; this is one of the purest action-arcade games we've played. You rotate a pointer around a central hexagon, aiming for gaps in the walls collapsing in on you. No time to think, just act. To master it feels like being Matrix's Neo, but dodging shapes, not bullets.



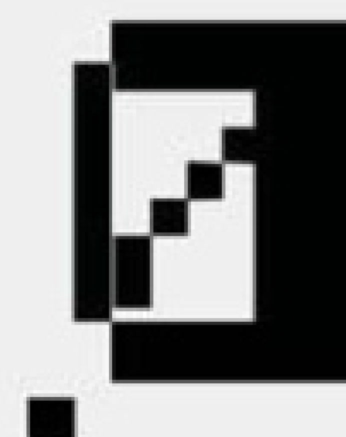


Guild Wars 2

Format Mac, PC **Publisher** NCsoft **Developer** ArenaNet

Acquiring and turning in quests is boring. So ArenaNet decided to simply let exploration lead to quests. Players don't play MMOGs together enough. So the developer made challenges that anyone can muck in with and profit from. Visually opulent, openhanded and fun to play, *Guild Wars 2* is a genuinely progressive take on the MMOG.

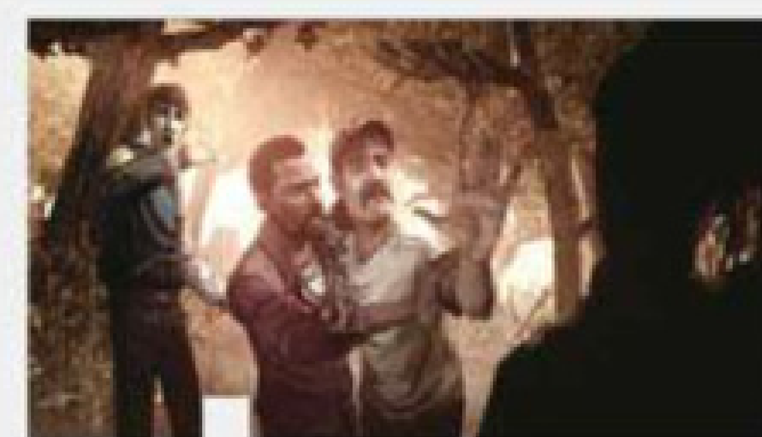


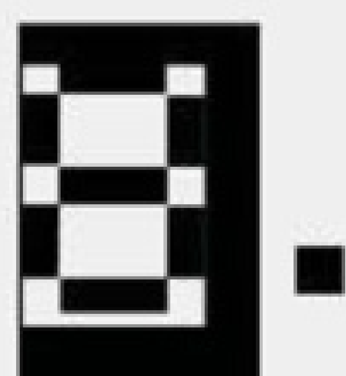


The Walking Dead

Format 360, iOS, Mac, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Telltale **Developer** In-house

There are many remarkable things about *The Walking Dead*: its heartbreaking central relationship, certainly, and the brutality of its choice system. Most remarkable of all is that it's a zombie game that isn't about zombies at all, one that's better than both the comic book and TV show that inspired it – a triumph for the developer that made the terrible *Jurassic Park*.

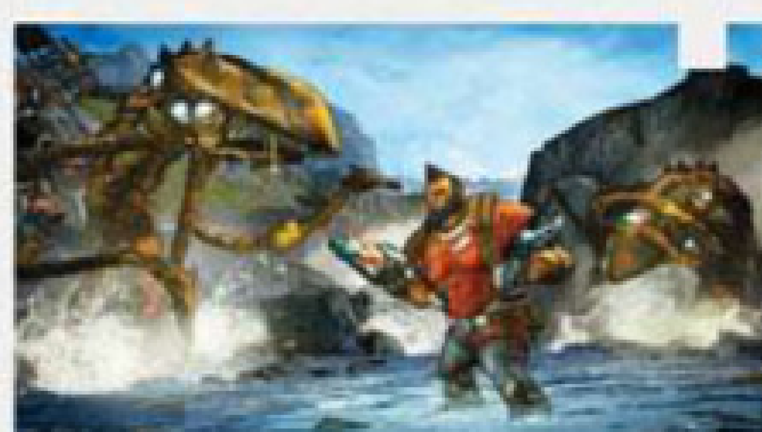




Borderlands 2

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** 2K **Developer** Gearbox

We can't remember the last time we laughed so much at a game's jokes, or took on low-level quests just so we wouldn't miss what happens in them. *Borderlands 2*'s pop culture references, non sequiturs and, yes, pathos, come so thick and fast that they almost keep up with the ever-evolving thunder of your collection of randomly generated guns.





Journey

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Thatgamecompany

The magic moment in our trek to *Journey*'s beckoning mountaintop came when we reached the crest of a desert sand dune and first noticed an identical pilgrim darting about in the valley below. Despite the remnants of a dead civilisation littered about in the sand, this was life so vivid that no AI could ever rival its emotional jolt.

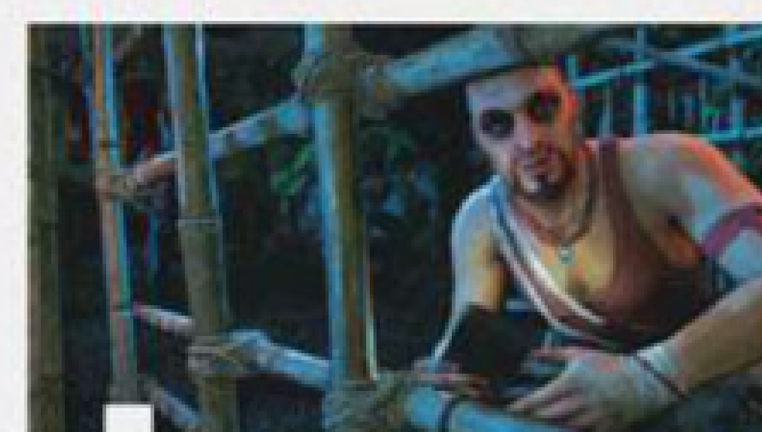




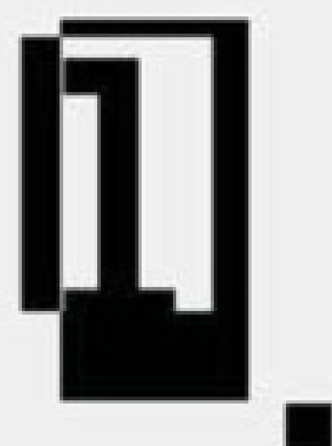
Far Cry 3

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Ubisoft **Developer** In-house

The jungle playground Ubisoft Montreal has created for its open-world opus is like a Bond she-villain: gorgeous, enticing, but potentially very bad for your health. Depraved gun-toting pirates, wild animals with sharp claws and teeth – there are plenty of ways this island can kill you. But it's hard not to be taken in by a game with such a fertile possibility space.



BEST VISUAL DESIGN

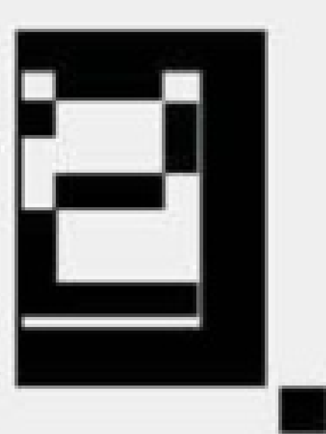




Journey

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Thatgamecompany

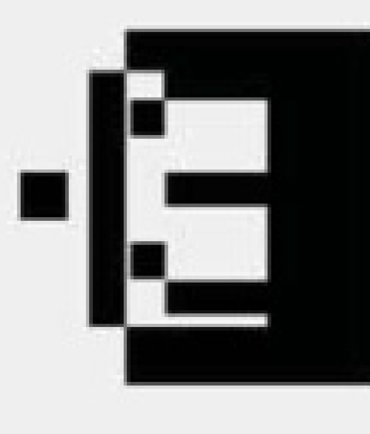
Journey's striking visual design is mostly about what it takes away, leaving behind sand, sky and mysterious ruins to describe your path. With an eye for breathtaking colour and light, *Journey* commands your moods, from the comforting sunset of its opening all the way up to your bitter white ascent. For all that its visuals are stylised, they're also warmly organic: sand subtly cascades into your footsteps as if it's a living thing, while fluttering scraps of cloth animate the world and your movement through it.



Dishonored

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Bethesda **Developer** Arkane Studios

A sense of history lives behind every detail in Dunwall, Arkane's imagination stretching from composed visual tableaus, which direct the eye with light across cast iron and slippery stone, to the dirt on the corrupt High Overseer Campbell's boots. Dunwall's watercolour decay is one of gaming's most coherent and richly realised art designs.



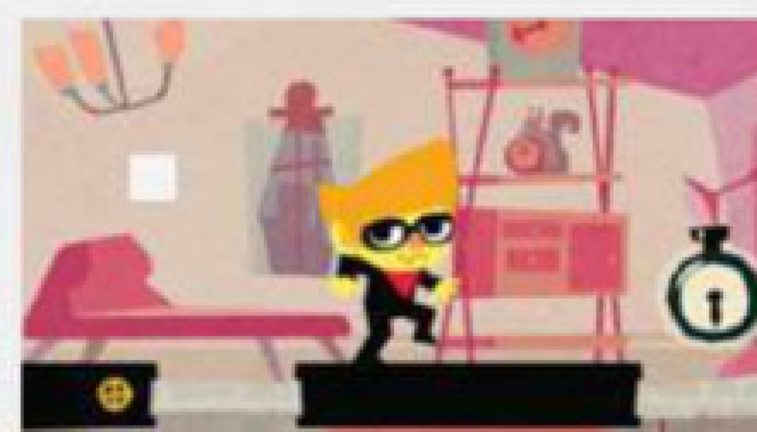
Fez

Format 360 **Publisher** Polytron **Developer** In-house

How can a single designer create a world as intricate and as sprawling as that of puzzle-platformer *Fez*? The answer is blocks, and lots of them. Phil Fish went a step further, though, decorating their apparently simple pixels with a well-chosen palette that conveys an extraordinary sense of nuance and beauty in every space.

BEST AUDIO DESIGN

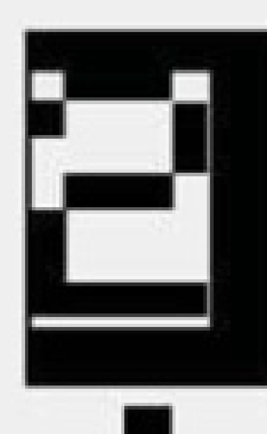




Beat Sneak Bandit

Format iOS **Publisher** Simogo **Developer** In-house

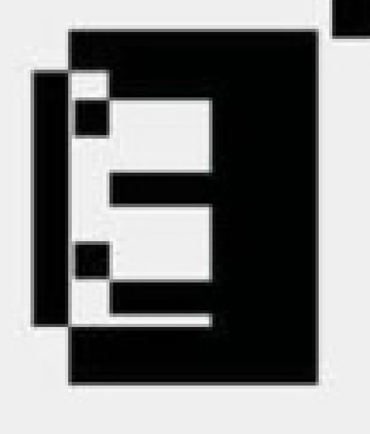
In the world of *Beat Sneak Bandit*, everything bobs, bounces or sways in time with the music. Alarm clocks pogo up and down, chandeliers sway like inverted metronome arms, and the helmet on a suit of armour jiggles and leaps into the air right on the downbeat. Since you must progress through its puzzles by tapping the screen in time with the beat, even you become yet another sympathetic vibration. The funky soundtrack doesn't merely succeed in being catchy, it manages to serve as the gameplay's very spine.



Sound Shapes

Format PS3, Vita **Publisher** SCE **Developer** Queasy Games

As robust as the level editor is in Queasy Games' platformer, we're still drawn time and again back to Beck's fantastic contributions. The times at the high end of the game's online leaderboards baffle us, though. These are not levels to be charged through as quickly as possible, but savoured; when you play them our way, they're not stages, but songs.

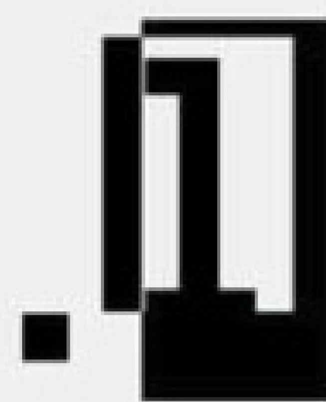


Dishonored

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Bethesda **Developer** Arkane Studios

Dunwall's atmosphere clings like a cold sweat, due in no small part to *Dishonored*'s audio. The zither strum of its alert signal; the faint swirling yowl of the Heart; tight echoes in its dank, scabby alleys; fluttering moths; the wet lapping of the river that carries the city's lifeblood. Here, music is incidental, and it's all the more powerful for it.

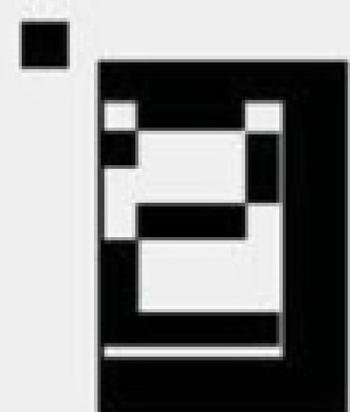
PUBLISHER OF THE YEAR





Ubisoft

The publisher that stole E3 with a surprise peek at what could be the next generation via *Watch Dogs* had a superlative year. It spanned from the enormity of *Assassin's Creed III* through to the small-screen *Rayman Jungle Run*. *Trials Evolution* dominated XBLA, while *Far Cry 3* looks set to rule Christmas; it made forays into free-to-play with *Ghost Recon Online*, musicianship with *Rocksmith*, and *ZombiU* was the most promising thirdparty game for Wii U's launch. In 2012, Ubisoft's breadth has been second to none.



Wargaming

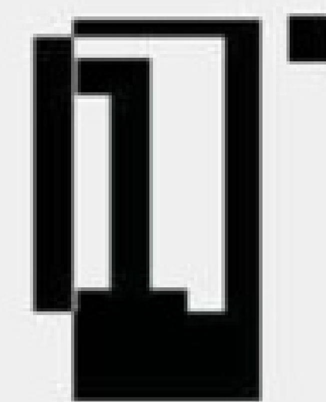
Wargaming's year has mirrored the inexorable progress of a campaign waged by its stable of tanks, fuelled by the kind of iron vision that knows making new games alongside *World Of Tanks* featuring planes and ships will only be additive. It's a company steadily building up to the world of war that its millions of players will have dreamt of.



Sony

While Microsoft distances itself from the indie scene, Sony sees promise in it, as well as a chance, perhaps, to support PlayStation's edgy brand values and distinguish it with fresh ideas. The fruits of that approach are that *Journey* and *Unfinished Swan* graced PS3, while *Sound Shapes* and *Velocity* did so much to help its handhelds feel relevant.

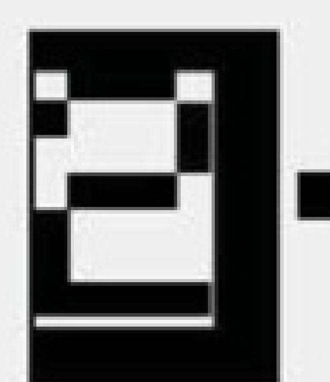
STUDIO OF THE YEAR





Arkane

The technical and creative consistency that makes *Dishonored* feel so special is the mark of a studio working at the height of its powers, and an achievement indeed considering that half the team is based in Lyon, France, and half in Austin, Texas. *Dishonored* is the game where many of Arkane's skills and ideas have really paid off: its firm belief in player choice, experience in finely honed melee combat and communicating a sense of firstperson physicality. We can't wait to see where the studio goes next.



ArenaNet

Massively multiplayer online games are fabulously complicated to launch, requiring labyrinthine systems of networking trickery and rolling expanses of content. ArenaNet also aimed to reinvent the form, and did so with sweeping but deft improvements to familiar ideas, all covered by a distinctive visual style. ArenaNet made MMOGs fresh again.



RedLynx

Despite being acquired by Ubisoft last year, RedLynx shows no sign of losing its character. Smartly focused design, technical mastery and a wicked sense of humour unite the hardcore petrol fumes and ragdoll torture of *Trials Evolution* with the cute iOS stylings of *MotoHeroz* and *Nutty Fluffies* (we'll even forgive RedLynx for that name).

ALTERNATIVE AWARDS

SADDEST DOG MURDER

Hotline Miami

Format PC **Publisher** Dennaton Games
Developer In-house

Hotline Miami is a deliciously transgressive evocation of the video nasty, and yet there's a point at which it becomes too much. Rubber masks you don before each killing spree confer special powers; the canine one makes the game's slavering Alsatians bound to you with love in their hearts, and yet you must butcher them all the same to beat the level. Poor pooches.



MOST REWRITTEN HISTORY

007 Legends

Format 360, PC, PS3, Wii U **Publisher** Activision
Developer Eurocom

It looks like we may *never* get the chance to play as Roger Moore. Activision's patchwork 50th bash for Bond, *007 Legends*, serves up a classic mission from each era of the spy's history, only to undercut its own premise by disconcertingly replacing the glittering stars of films past with Daniel Craig's geological blankness and by throwing in a bloody Xperia T handset.

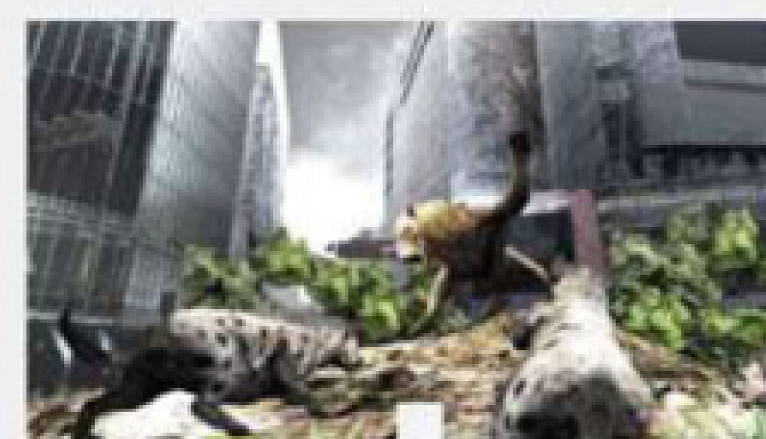


MOST UNORTHODOX DARWINISM

Tokyo Jungle

Format PS3 **Publisher** SCE
Developer PlayStation CAMP, Japan Studio

Dog-eat-dino survival game *Tokyo Jungle* features a wasteland of brutal animal competition following the mysterious disappearance of all the humans. Survival of the fittest is the overarching theme here, though what Darwin couldn't have guessed is that sometimes the fittest is a pack of vicious Pomeranians working like a cloud of bared teeth in order to take down a tiger.

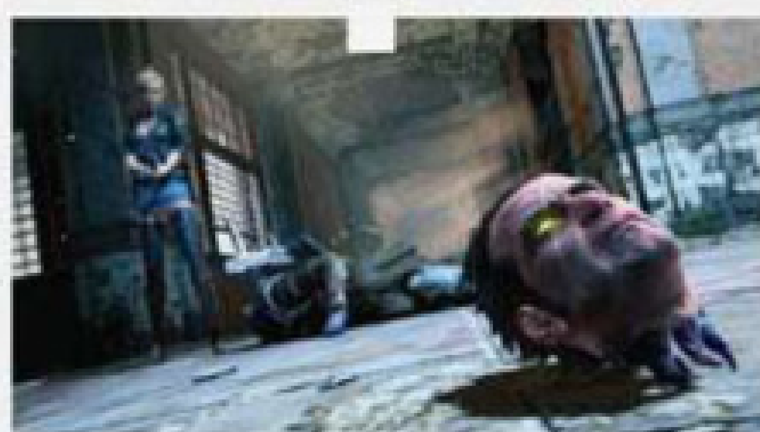


MOST PERSISTENT HERO

Bryce Boltzmann

From *NeverDead* **Format** 360, PS3
Publisher Konami **Developer** Rebellion

The immortal hero of raucous arcade blaster *NeverDead* takes the regenerating health trend to its logical conclusion. Nothing will stop demon hunter Bryce from pursuing his prey, and certainly not losing his arms or legs. In fact, not even losing his entire body and having to roll after them as a desperate severed head like he's starring in a dignity-free revamp of *Marble Madness*.



EMPTIEST PROMISES

Peter Molyneux

A Molyneux game that doesn't work quite as promised? Surely not. Yet the 'life-changing' *Curiosity* was plagued by server issues that led to its creator asking for donations to keep it running. A tearful Molyneux then vowed he wouldn't overpromise 22cans' *Populous* remake *Godus*, so naturally its Kickstarter video closes on the words "change the nature of gaming". Oh, Peter.

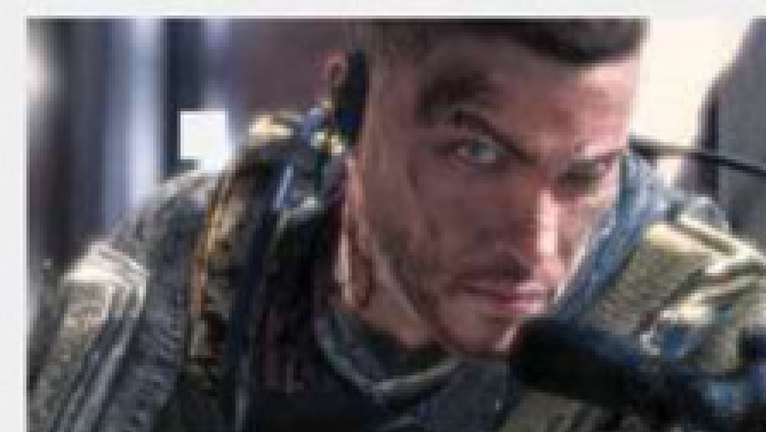


MOST INSPIRED CASTING

Nolan North

In *Spec Ops: The Line* **Format** 360, PC, PS3
Publisher 2K **Developer** Yager

Yager's journey into the heart of darkness offered a welcome counterpoint to *Medal Of Honor*'s gun fetishism. Its greatest coup may have been signing up Mr Nathan Drake as its increasingly unhinged protagonist – in cleverly subverting what we've come to expect from gaming's most familiar voice, Yager makes the descent into madness all the more affecting.

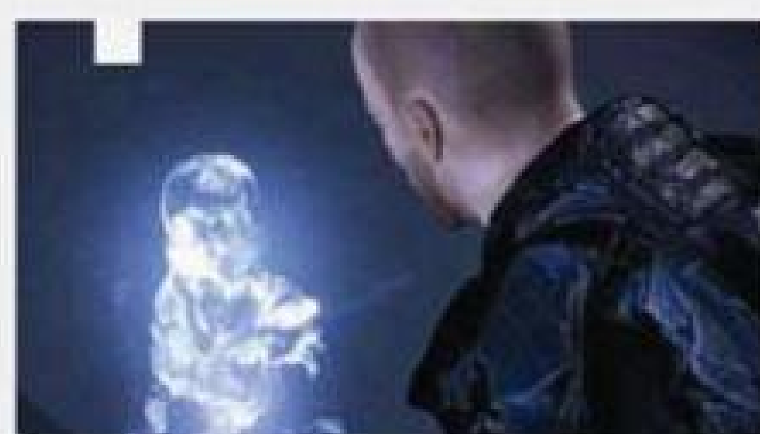


SHARPEST PITCHFORKS

Mass Effect 3 fans

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** EA
Developer BioWare

In a year of controversies, the outrage that united the hordes and mobilised the industry to take action wasn't sexism, a lack of diversity or poor journalistic practice, but the ending to *Mass Effect 3*. A fight about entitlement and an Extended Cut later, few seemed satisfied. But we did learn something: pain is best expressed via mocking cupcakes.



MOST DELAYED GRATIFICATION

Assassin's Creed III

Format 360, PC, PS3 **Publisher** Ubisoft
Developer In-house

You know that guy on the front of the box? The one calmly bludgeoning the British soldier with a tomahawk as the Revolutionary War rages in the background? Wearing the dirty white hooded Assassin's suit, the evolution of the garb we wore all the way through the long careers of proud Altaïr and rakish Ezio? *You don't get to be him for six hours.*

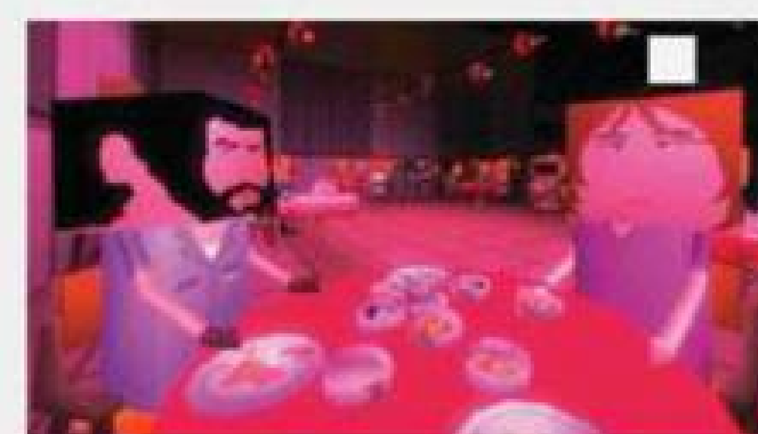


BEST CREDITS SEQUENCE

Thirty Flights Of Loving

Format Mac, PC **Publisher** Blendo Games
Developer In-house

What better way to end an experiment in telling a splintered firstperson heist story than with a cocktail party in a museum with exhibits explaining the scientific principle of flying? The credits also place the game among Blendo's other releases and showcase the art used in its creation, making it all integral to appreciating this gem.



MOST AWKWARD TITLE

Theatrhythm Final Fantasy

Format 3DS **Publisher** Square Enix
Developer Indieszero

Square Enix is master of the tortuous videogame title. *Parasite Eve*, *Front Mission*, *Romancing Saga*: just some of the company's series fighting to outdo one another. None surpasses *Theatrhythm Final Fantasy*. This unpronounceable contraction of 'theatre' and 'rhythm' hopes to illuminate the game's themes, but instead leaves us all none the wiser.



MOST HASTILY GATHERED TALENT

343 Industries

For *Halo 4* **Format** 360
Publisher Microsoft

Shifting from being a small Microsoft team overseeing *Halo*'s media universe a couple of years ago to the crack developer behind one of the year's biggest releases, 343 Industries has been through radical changes. But the team still managed to build *Halo 4* with a scope and quality of execution that equals that of Bungie. Here's hoping for new ideas for the next one, though.

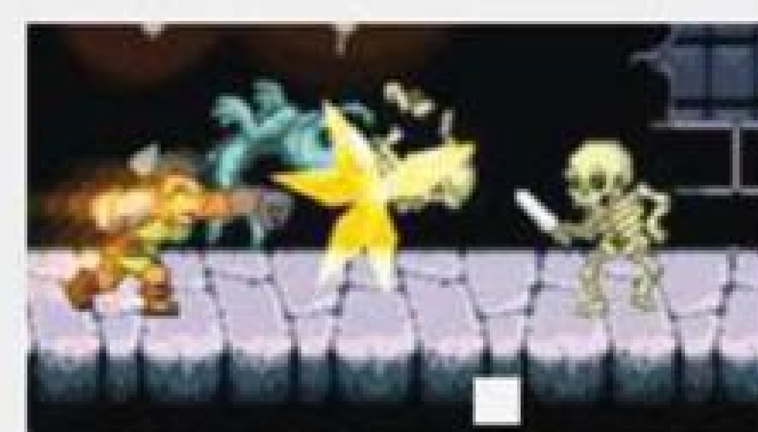


MOST UNDESERVED F2P CATACLYSM

Punch Quest

Format iOS **Publisher** RocketCat
Developer In-house

By the time RocketCat had almost reached a million downloads of its brilliant free-to-play auto-runner, *Punch Quest*, the game had banked a paltry $10K, barely a minimum wage salary for the developer effort involved. It's sad that RocketCat was forced to learn an expensive lesson in what non-grinding, non-pestering, player-friendly game design gets you in the world of free-to-play.



PLAY

REVIEWS. INTERVIEWS. PERSPECTIVES. AND SOME NUMBERS

STILL PLAYING

Spec Ops: The Line 360, PC, PS3
With this game back in the critical imagination, we've revisited its attempt to pick at the scab of American exceptionalism and the collateral damage of modern war, regardless of how noble the motives might be for entering the fray. *Spec Ops* is a game that holds your scalp and repeatedly plunges your head into extreme violence, leaving you gasping for air between its most horrific sequences. When you catch your breath, there's always plenty to talk about.

Punch Quest iOS
It's the little touches that coax you back into *Punch Quest*. The way a skeleton knight's head, after you've fed it a knuckle sandwich, dislodges and bounces across the field of play like a stone skipping across the surface of a lake. The rare moments when you stumble across what appears to be a gnome cocktail party and punch your way through both the tiny revellers and their adorably small casks. Wouldn't it be poetic if they were drinking punch?

The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim 360, PC, PS3
Ridiculously big games have some well-documented drawbacks. Their vast dimensions can feel daunting just as easily as they can feel enticing. But one of the joys of *Skyrim*'s positively enormous world is that you can snack on it for years to come. It's not a bone that you ever pick clean. There are always more secrets to find, like raiding a hen house full of Easter eggs.

REVIEWED THIS ISSUE



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Open versus linear game design has no clear-cut hero

Far Cry 3 (p94) hands you a gluttonous buffet of options. Do you want to go shark hunting in the ocean using the nose of your jet ski as a jousting lance? Maybe you'd rather pick flowers or hunt for collectible tribal relics instead. Or there are pirate outposts to subdue, which you can charge into like Rambo, or slither through a hole in the fence like Solid Snake. There are racing challenges, poker games and darts. There are radio towers to scale that illuminate swathes of your map. There are Rakyat challenges, which function like arcade minigames with their own friend leaderboards.

There's so much to keep you occupied on the Rook Islands that it's easy to forget you have friends in captivity who are relying on you to set them free, which is probably why the game occasionally intrudes with a reminder alert about your next story mission. It feels like a tacit admission that such variety of choice can blunt the momentum of a game narrative.



Call of Duty: Black Ops II (p90) narrows the range of gameplay options considerably. Activision's golden goose frequently gets chided by critics for its extreme linearity. When faced with the choice between open and linear progression, the idea of openness seems immediately preferable, a choice between freedom and bondage. But you could just as easily recast such differences as a spectrum between focused and unfocused.

Black Ops II accommodates a bit more choice this time around, letting players choose a custom loadout before each campaign mission. This might seem like a meagre concession, but it has clear ramifications for whether you'll adopt a close-combat or ranged strategy. One thing is certain: the rising action will never stall out while you go joy-riding about the surrounding countryside in an ATV.

Call Of Duty: Black Ops II

About halfway through *Black Ops II*'s singleplayer campaign, your squad steps from a helicopter onto Colossus, a luxury floating resort in the Cayman Islands. One squadmate sighs, saying, "So, this is how the one per cent lives." No, this is how the one per cent makes games. It's what happens when a publisher gives a studio a blank cheque, a luxury almost unique to *Call Of Duty*.

Evidence of this is found in the campaign, which is admittedly the same blockbuster hokum as ever, penned this time by Hollywood scriptwriter David S Goyer and sporting a series-first branching storyline. Six different endings depend on both spur of the moment moral A/B testing and your performance. Failure to capture or kill a target used to mean a restart; here, it often leads to repercussions. The goal, clearly, is longevity. Ever since *Modern Warfare* lowered the bar for campaign length, the story has been something to plough through in the first weekend – there to ease you into the mechanics, an FNG training run for the months of nightly multiplayer sessions to follow.

Black Ops II's singleplayer campaign, however, is genuinely replayable. That's thanks not just to branching narrative paths, but geographical ones too. No longer restricting you to a specific combination of weapons and attachments for a mission, you get to choose your loadout, including multiplayer-style perks. This has had a positive impact on level design, with Treyarch ensuring players aren't punished for swapping the default SMG and pistol for a sniper rifle and shotgun, offering a handy bell tower here, an inviting network of outbuildings over there. These aren't the expansive arenas of *Halo* – you're still following your nose, or a squadmate's feet, to the next objective – but Treyarch's crammed a lot into these tight spaces. A scoring system, with friends-list-based leaderboards, adds further reason to replay, as do a suite of weapon-specific, objective-based and timed challenges.

Also new is Strike Force, a suite of RTS-lite missions in which you control a squad of troops and, on occasion, vehicles. Though entirely optional, such missions do affect the storyline, even letting you correct mistakes you've made in the campaign. In one, we rescued an NPC kidnapped by a villain who we failed to catch in the previous mission. While you can give orders from a tactical camera positioned up in the sky, useless friendly AI – reluctant to move as instructed, let alone engage the enemy – meant we did most of the legwork ourselves at ground level.

The story's near-future setting helps the series get past its long-standing 'F-Yeah!' jingoism. Sure, America's under attack again, but for once this is not a tale born out of lingering Cold War or post-9/11 paranoia. If there's a bogeyman here, it's China, but the

Publisher Activision
Developer Treyarch
Format 360 (version tested), PC, PS3, Wii U
Release Out now

What a shooting gallery. It's lightning fast, with sluggish movement and wooly hit detection eradicated



two are cast as allies within minutes, united against antagonist Raul Menendez. But it takes a while to get there. Much of the first half of the game is set in the 1980s, with Sergeant Frank Woods – presumed KIA at the end of the first *Black Ops* but very much alive, retired, and well into his 90s in 2025 – telling the Menendez origin story. Here, the game is at its weakest, only really settling into a groove after a couple of hours, at which point that near-future setting comes into its own. Much of that is due to 2020s military technology, most of it automated, powered by the same rare earth elements Menendez plans to use to launch a massive cyber-attack that will destroy the US, China, and capitalism in one fell swoop. There are drones, of course, cloaking devices, and the AT-AT lookalike Claw tanks shown off when the game was announced. There's a sniper rifle that can be charged up, killing enemies through the densest of cover; there are attachments that highlight targets in bright orange diamonds. The weaponset is largely familiar, though, with near-future spins on series staples such as the AK-47, Skorpion and SPAS-12, but the attachments and perks available make things feel genuinely futuristic.

All of which is just as well given that, fundamentally, the action is otherwise *COD* standard-issue. There are a few too many moments of that staple, the protracted scenes of hands-off bombast: one early low point saw us roll out of the way of a tank, get rescued by a squadmate on horseback, jump back to the tank that nearly killed us, have a punch-up on top of it, drop a mortar round through the hatch and jump to safety – all without pressing a single button. It's still a shooting gallery, too, with static enemies popping endlessly in and out of cover unless scripted to do otherwise. Don't expect to be outflanked or out-thought, then, but running smooth and lightning fast, the same dumb, dizzying rollercoaster is now a markedly less throwaway one. These are levels to be picked apart, to be mined for optimum routes and loadouts, completing challenges and taking on friends' high scores.

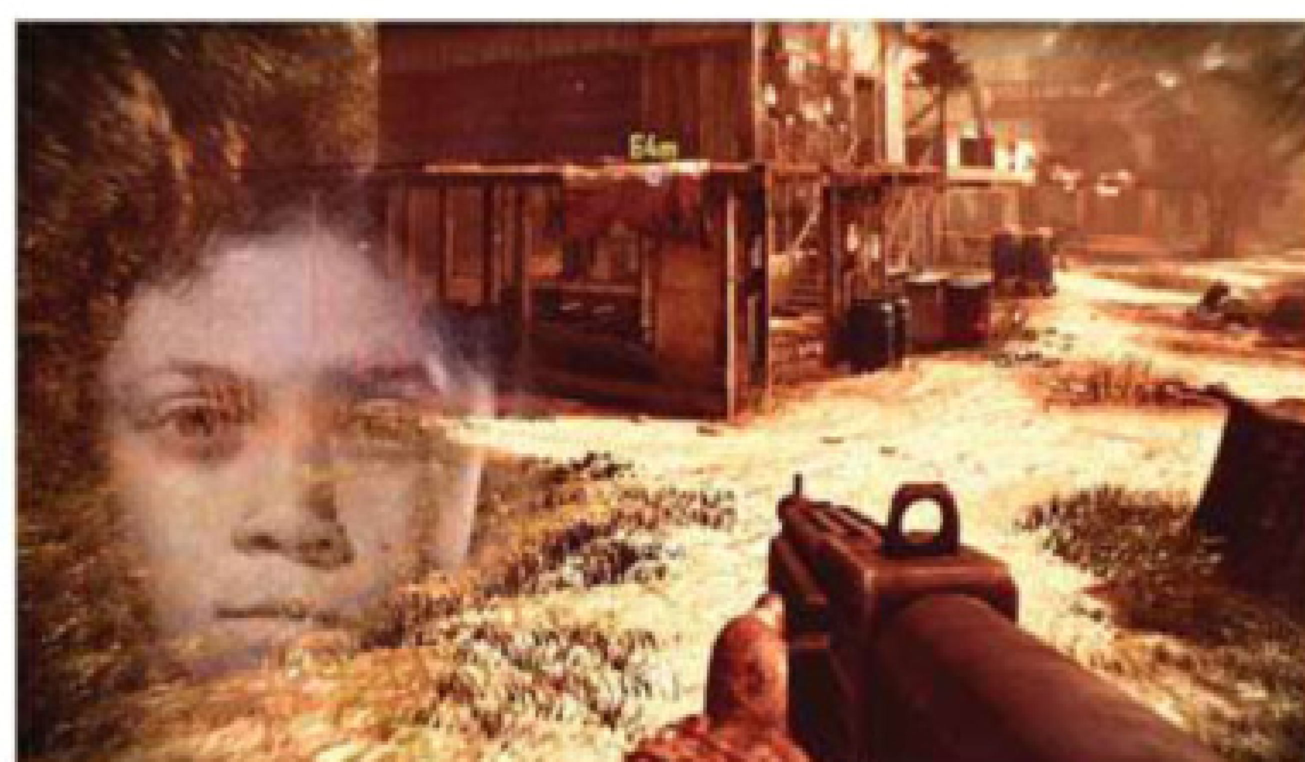
Despite the changes to the campaign, it's little surprise to see that Treyarch hasn't strayed too far from *COD*'s multiplayer formula. The principal change is to the loadout system, which abandons the fixed setup of old in favour of Pick 10, allowing you much greater flexibility in the guns, attachments, grenades and perks you take onto the battlefield. While this affords greater experimentation, it raises concerns about how the thousands of possible combinations have been balanced against each other, but it enables greater specialisation, too. You can do a lot to a shotgun build with three attachments and perks focused on movement speed.

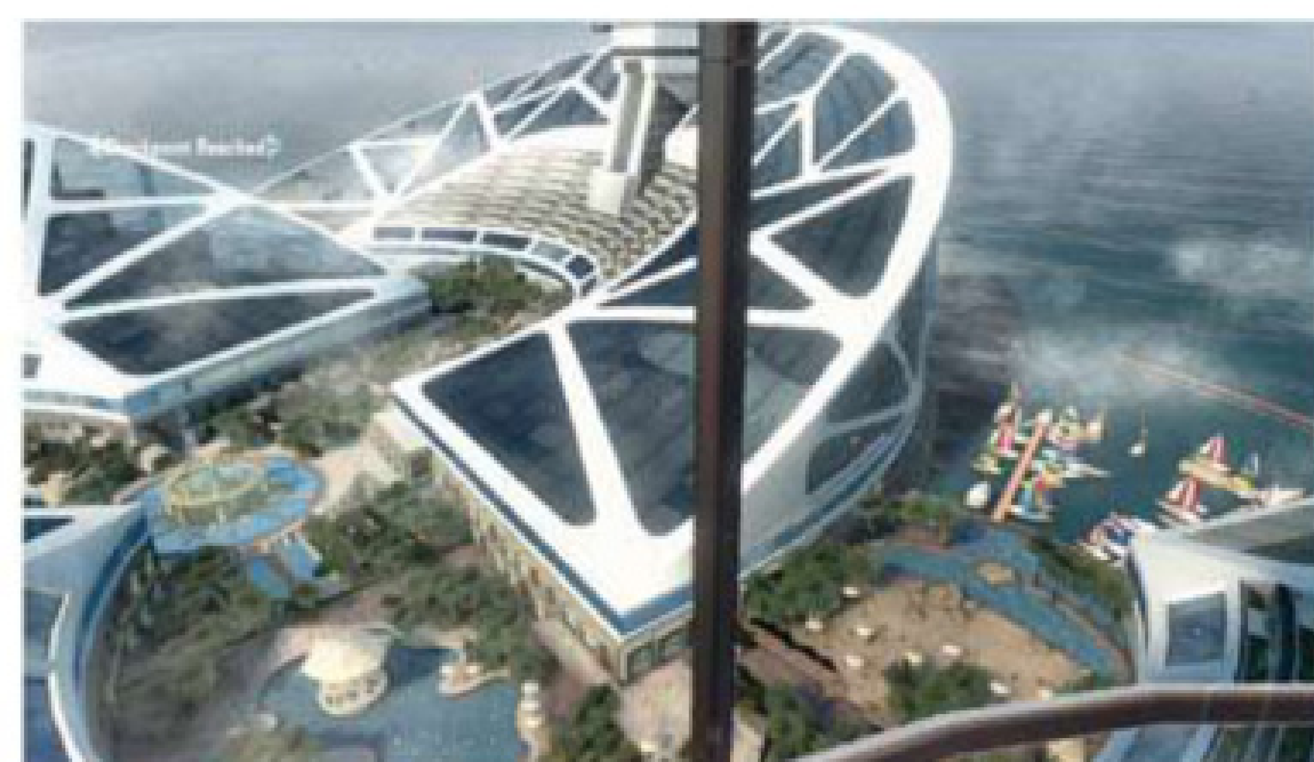
It's early days for the maps themselves – if history's any guide the userbase of millions will immediately set about finding map glitches and broken spawns – but

ABOVE As in the original *Black Ops*, custom reticles are unlocked as you progress through multiplayer. We've tended to stick with the red dot on our preferred Reflex sight, but there's little more humiliating than the killcam revealing you've been sniped by a smiley face.
LEFT This is a clear step forward for Treyarch's audio designers, and not just in the gun sounds. The sudden surge in volume as we walked from bar to heaving dancefloor brings back memories, although the songs playing then weren't by Skrillex



RIGHT We're not sure if Treyarch intended for the Menendez level to be played for laughs, but it's better that way. Dealing death at hyper speed, machete and shotgun in hand, it's like playing multiplayer with all the perks on at once.
FAR RIGHT If Colossus is any guide, life is every bit as kind to the richest in 2025 as it is now. This, one of the campaign's high points, also contains a terrifying glimpse of the future of advertising





ABOVE **The main Zombies gametype, Tranzit, sees players ferried between areas by bus. This will depart soon after the first player boards it, making communication essential to prevent your teammates from getting stranded**

worthy rivals to the first two *Modern Warfare* games. Every piece of cover is there for a reason: rooms have multiple entrances to prevent campers hunkering down with claymores for protection, and only a handful of maps are truly sniper-friendly. They're colourful, too, a welcome change after two years of greys and browns.

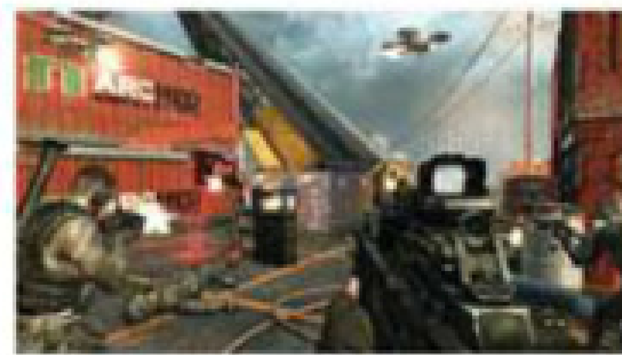
Many subtly reference older maps: Turbine's desert setting and central weathered fuselage bears more than a trace of *Modern Warfare 2*'s Fuel; Aftermath nods to *Black Ops*' Cracked. Some are clear series firsts, such as Express, which is set in an LA train station (fatal moving parts and all), and Raid, which drops players in the grounds of a lavish Hollywood mansion. Hijacked is the weakest of the bunch, a close-quarters map set on a luxury yacht that is too small and linear for such a fast game; you're almost guaranteed to spawn on top of an enemy at some point. At first glance, this is the 2025 equivalent of *Black Ops*' bafflingly popular Nuketown, the sole returning map, a pre-order bonus mercifully only available in a single playlist, Nuketown 24/7.

Many of Treyarch's tweaks in *Black Ops II* are thoughtful, showing an awareness of the series' long-standing problems. Killstreaks are now Scorestreaks, meaning the best toys are no longer the sole preserve of the slayers. The scoring system rewards those who play objective modes in the correct spirit – not purely for kills – and you get payoffs for shooting down air support. Naturally, players will still complain – in these early days, you'll be shot in the back so regularly you'll begin questioning the spawn system –but such teething problems are sure to be resolved as the game matures.

There's a sense of maturity to all of Treyarch's work here. Look to Zombies, a mode that was once a distraction, a frippery between campaign and multiplayer and Treyarch's alternative to *Modern Warfare*'s Spec Ops. Now, it benefits from Activision's investment as a fully fledged campaign set across multiple stages, with numerous routes through each. In addition to the four-player Tranzit mode is a new gametype, Grief, which sees two teams of four enter an area but only one walk out. There's much to like here, if much to be frustrated by as well – chiefly the inability to jump to safety over obstacles that could easily be cleared in the campaign or multiplayer. Zombies shows Treyarch's confidence in its hallmarks, and the knowledge there are increasing numbers of people who buy its games purely for the undead.

Black Ops II is lavish, flamboyant and breathless, but isn't *Call Of Duty* like that every year? And yet every release seems to come with problems – changes for change's sake that also overlooked the same old obvious flaws. The people who decry *Call Of Duty* for being the same every year have a point, of course, but you get the feeling they don't actually play it. For those who put in hundreds of hours every year, every little change is potentially game-breaking, and this is the tightrope that Treyarch walks. Backed by Activision's fantastic investment and support, Treyarch has succeeded, and made a sort of ultimate current-gen *Call Of Duty*. Not a reinvention – that, hopefully, comes next year, on box-fresh hardware and a new engine – but a refinement of the most successful series of its generation. *Black Ops II* is an excellent *Call Of Duty* game, then, but it's only a *Call Of Duty* game, with all that implies.

8



CASTAWAYS

Black Ops II builds on its predecessor's Theatre mode in a thoroughly logical but commendably ambitious way – competitive League Play matches can be livestreamed to a player's YouTube account. CODcasting, meanwhile, rearranges screen furniture so that realtime scoreboards are visible alongside the action, with a commentator – or 'caster' – able to view the action from each player's perspective at the touch of a button. It's not only recognition of a rapidly growing pastime, but also removes the barrier to entry that previously limited streaming and 'casting to those with powerful PCs or pricey capture devices.

Post Script

The black art of perks and loadouts

Over the course of the five *Call Of Duty* games since *Modern Warfare*'s levelling and loadout systems redefined the online console shooter, features have come, gone, and frequently come again. Certain perks and class setups have been removed one year, only to be reintroduced the next. When a series is ping-ponged back and forth between two developers on an annual basis there are bound to be alterations, of course, but it's still enormously tempting to see the way Treyarch omits something from an Infinity Ward game one year (or vice versa) and then have it pop up again 12 months later as a sort of running battle.

Infinity Ward under Jason West and Vince Zampella – the studio heads who quit shortly after the release of *Modern Warfare 2* in a dispute over unpaid bonuses – saw Treyarch not as colleagues, but competitors. When Activision sued the pair over their departure, its legal filing accused them of deliberately releasing a trailer for the upcoming *Modern Warfare 2* on the same day as the map pack for Treyarch's *World At War* was announced. Hatred? Trolling? How about griefing? The latter seems most appropriate, given that under Zampella and West Infinity Ward went to great lengths to enable people to play its *COD* games not for kills, or wins, but to enrage.

In *Modern Warfare*, it was grenades. That the perk giving players three frag grenades per life was absent from 2008's *World At War* and hasn't been seen since says a lot about how silly it was. Certain maps became almost unplayable, especially Shipment, a map so small you could throw a grenade from one corner to the other if you released it at the peak of a jump. There was the Martyrdom perk, too, which made you drop a live grenade on death, and enabled a 'suicide bomber' build. All you needed to do was run up to a group of enemies, flash or stun grenade in hand. Die and the disabling grenade would go off, rooting your foes to the spot just long enough for your Martyrdom frag to slay them.

Modern Warfare 2 had the Ripper loadout, in which guns were carried but never fired, players only using the knife melee attack. Using the Marathon perk for infinite sprint, Lightweight for increased movement speed, and Commando for increased melee range, you could top the scoreboard without firing a single round – to the very vocal chagrin of the enemy team.

The Danger Close perk, meanwhile, increased splash damage from explosives. When combined with Scavenger, which refilled your ammo from the bodies of fallen foes, you had an infinite supply of rockets and grenades. There was also the Tactical Nuke, the game's final killstreak reward, requiring 25 kills to unlock. Can there be any higher plane of griefing than wiping out the entire enemy team – as well as your own – and ending the game outright?

Infinity Ward went to great lengths to enable people to play its COD games not for kills, or wins, but to enrage



By the time *Modern Warfare 3* came around, West and Zampella were long gone, and the game felt more like a remix of the previous entries in the series. If there was any griefing going on, it was the developers doing it with dreadful post-launch support, neglecting to fix a host of issues, including a highly exploitable spawn system. Throughout, Treyarch has diligently sought to fix Infinity Ward's problems in its games, trying to keep everyone happy with an approach to multiplayer that is more fair than fun. Until now.

Much of *Black* *Ops II*'s griefing potential comes from the Pick 10 system. It didn't take the player base long to work out that you don't need to take a full complement of ten, of course, or that there were advantages in not doing so. Take nothing but a knife and some perks affecting movement speed into battle and you've got a good approximation of *MW2*'s Ripper class. Take those same perks, a submachine gun with a laser sight to increase hip-fire accuracy and you can sprint endlessly around the more enclosed maps, winning every gunfight without ever aiming down the sights. Even quickscoping – a soft exploit of the Infinity Ward games' aiming system that enables players to run and gun with sniper rifles as if they were shotguns – is in, and that speaks volumes. Treyarch design director David Vonderhaar has a vocal hatred of quickscoping, and the studio has always gone out of its way to force snipers to play like snipers.

Black Ops II's principal griefing tool hasn't been borrowed from an earlier *Call Of Duty*; it's an entirely new creation afforded by the game's near-future setting. The Black Hat, a support item carried in place of a flash or stun grenade, can be used to hack or steal enemy equipment. You've been able to do this in previous games, but never from distance, or through walls.

When combined with the Engineer perk, which alerts you to enemy equipment by turning it a bright, glowing red, it's perhaps the most lethal – and certainly the funniest – tool in the game. A foe in the next room, or on the floor above, might put down a claymore or Bouncing Betty to protect their back. You'll see this illuminated through the wall or ceiling. Now point the Black Hat in its direction and that red glow disappears, because it's yours now – the next time your enemy moves, he's going to die. If griefing opponents isn't enough, you can do it to teammates, too, stealing their care package from a distance before they can collect it.

Black Hat is perhaps the clearest reflection of the shift in thinking at Treyarch that permeates *Black Ops II*'s multiplayer. After the rather po-faced *Black Ops*, this is a game about fun first and foremost, even if it often comes at the expense of others. ■

Far Cry 3

Start your story in the middle, they say. While *Far Cry 3* doesn't go quite that far, it does establish its premise with brutal economy. Its Rook Islands are a paradisal warzone, with the native islanders now on the losing side of a protracted conflict with the pirates and privateers who have established a heavy presence on their shores. Pirate commander Vaas is a psychotic murderer. And Jason Brody is the run-of-the-mill everyman thrust into the midst of the insanity.

Well, sort of. Jason's only as much of an average Joe as the game, and its open world, allows him to be. And while *Far Cry 3*'s story tells a good tale of an ordinary guy finding his inner warrior in extraordinary circumstances, its mechanics do not. Jason starts the game remarkably proficient with both firearms and explosives, and ends it incredibly proficient with them. For every well-observed moment of conflict between the mundane urban lifestyle he's leaving behind and his warrior's calling – including one exquisitely timed phone call from a concerned girlfriend that happens to intrude on him doing something time-sensitive with C4 – there are moments that shatter the illusion.

The game tries to start Jason off slowly, sending him off foraging in its forest during the second mission. It's a neat idea, and a deft introduction to the crafting mechanics, but that doesn't change the fact that our playthrough saw the novice action hero take a dip in a nearby river to harvest some aquatic plants and emerge having wrestled a crocodile to death. After *Far Cry*'s sci-fi and *Far Cry 2*'s politics, there's a spiritual, mystical theme running through this third game that seeks to support Jason's apparently superhuman abilities. While this does help suspend disbelief, it can't change the lack of a meaningful journey for him.

Of course, if *Far Cry 3* had hobbled players from the start, there'd be no sense in giving them a whole island to explore. And the Rook Islands are a beautiful slice of paradise, a postcard-perfect mixture of lush green forest, open beach and soaring peaks, run through with river routes and dotted with lagoons. It offers less varied terrain than its predecessor's unspecified chunk of Africa, however, which offered lush pockets not too dissimilar to this as well as wrapping a desert or open grassland around them. But while the Rook Islands' flora doesn't look quite as ready for the tinderbox as the savannah's yellowing grass, you can rest assured it responds just as eagerly to a flame.

Indeed, view *Far Cry 3* as a postmodern neocolonial critique in which a western explorer alights upon a remote tropical paradise and razes it to the ground in the name of benevolent intervention, and you'll be surprised how well it all holds together, not least because progression is marked in terms of territory claimed as much as distanced travelled. *Far Cry 2*'s checkpoints were nuggets of emergent possibility – unpredictable assortments of guards, supplies, vehicles and terrain that could be approached however you saw fit. *Far Cry 3* has Outposts – similar stations that could have been plucked straight from the African plains but for one crucial difference: they no longer respawn.

Publisher Ubisoft
Developer In-house (Montreal)
Format 360, PC (version tested), PS3
Release Out now

The Rook Islands are a beautiful slice of paradise, a postcard-perfect mixture of lush green forest and open beach



An outpost cleared in *Far Cry 3* becomes a position controlled by the Rakyat, the local militia aligned with Jason. You can save and fast travel here, as well as purchase or upgrade guns and take on sidequests. More importantly, however, the takeover will have an effect on the surrounding environment, dramatically lowering the incidence of pirate activity in the region.

Far Cry 2's civil war existed in rigid stalemate, with little direct contact between its two interchangeable factions. There's a greater sense of conflict in *Far Cry 3*, where the colour-coded pirate and native patrols can stumble across one another and engage in unscripted skirmishes. Add in the island's native animal population (which is surely large and aggressive enough to qualify for third faction status), and you have a recipe for some beautifully emergent chaos and occasional comedy. So a simple shootout between Jason and an enemy patrol could get gatecrashed by some overly keen islanders who, in their rush to lend assistance, inadvertently attract the attention of small pack of Komodo dragons. At one point, we were bought precious seconds to heal and find cover when a tapir, rest its soul, unwittingly strolled into the path of a reinforcement-packed jeep.

Of course, the Rook Islands ecosystem has more function than simply providing a wildcard element to combat. Jason can hunt animals for their hides, and he'll need to do so if he wants to expand his inventory. The demands of the crafting system are entirely arbitrary – you can a make a moderately sized ammo pouch out of two dingo hides, for instance, but if you want to make a larger one then only the pelts of another species will do. But this does, at least, force you into the wild. In order to create a new holster that would allow us to carry an extra gun, for instance, we had to head out to sea. Hunting sharks from the comfort of our hovercraft and with the aid of a grenade launcher made for an amusing couple of minutes, but that didn't make diving to the seabed to harvest their skins any less terrifying. The gory cutting of hide from flesh is complemented by a foraging system that allows Jason to make stat-boosting syringes out of plant life.

But for all the embellishments and tweaks, including an RPG-lite set of skill trees, the core of the game is very much *Far Cry 2*. Combat is robust, with hefty feeling guns and satisfyingly large explosions – and enlivened by a strong awareness of Jason's physical presence. He kicks up dirt when he slides, tumbles disorientatingly out of jeeps, and pulls off the trick of elegantly using cover in a firstperson game. Even so,

ABOVE Vehicles are better used for escape and long-distance travel than combat, since you can't fire a gun when driving. Enemies are good at dodging cars, too. Usually. LEFT The camera can be used to mark targets. Once tagged, Jason will be able to track them on his minimap as well as see where they are through walls. It's an invaluable tool for planning your attacks



RIGHT Sharks are terrifying, and *Far Cry* knows it. In truth, they tend to toy with you rather than gobble you up, but there's still something ominous about seeing their sleek forms glide through the water. FAR RIGHT Rescuing your friends provides your motivation to delve further into your supposed destiny as a warrior. This leads to some genuinely tender moments that we won't spoil for you here





hectic gunfights aren't *Far Cry 3*'s strongest suit. Despite the nominal distinction between enemy types, they're all rather similar when you take them on face-to-face. Like its predecessor, the real thrill of *Far Cry 3* is found in the execution of plans formed while lying in the long grass, perhaps using Jason's camera to pick out mercenaries before taking them out silently, or maybe annihilating the Outpost in a swift, considered attack. If *Halo* is built around 30 seconds of fun, then the *Far Cry* series is built around these three minutes.

At least this is the case in singleplayer. *Far Cry 3*'s multiplayer modes are diverting enough, but both the cooperative and competitive gametypes focus on arcade-like shooting. Play against other humans is built around the fashionable blend of customisable loadouts, streak rewards and progression trees that *Call Of Duty* has popularised. Its maps have been competently constructed, with chokepoints, switchbacks and multiple lines of sight; its gametypes are variations upon recognisable themes, and everything works much as you'd expect. It's doomed to sink without a trace in the face of *COD*, in other words. Co-op fares better. There's not much room for stealth in the funnelled encounters this sidestory provides, but a group of four players is more than capable of flanking, outwitting and toying with a pack of pirates.

Even the campaign's three minutes of fun can end up looping a little too repetitively, though, due to a ripple effect caused by some well-meaning changes. This is a more considerate game than its predecessor. The lack of respawning Outposts, plentiful fast travel options, and generous mid-mission checkpoints are joined by the fact your guns no longer break. The resulting game is



FULL SYNCHRONISATION

We're not sure if the cause is shared team members or some sort of contamination in the water supply at Ubisoft Montreal, but there's evidence of cross-pollination from *Assassin's Creed* in *Far Cry 3*. Radio towers are viewpoints, right down to their map-filling function and pan around camera movement when you scale them, though they also have curious ancillary purpose of unlocking more weapons at stores. Platforming here is less fun than in Ubisoft's other series, however, but we've got to admit that zooming down a zipline after reaching the peak of each tower is probably more entertaining than leaping into yet another bale of hay.

ABOVE You'll know when Jason's in cover, because he shifts the position of his gun without actually sticking to a wall. Then it's just a case of holding the aim button to pop out and fire off some shots at the pirates

less prone to frustrate you, but it's also one where journeys feel shorter and less eventful, and where things are less likely to go wrong. In *Far Cry 2*, having your rickety sniper rifle shatter into pieces, or succumbing to a malaria attack in the midst of a shootout might have been irritating, but it was justified by the thrill of calling upon your powers of improvisation to salvage the situation. Find a set of tactics that work in *Far Cry 3*, however, and you can rely upon them indefinitely – you have to switch approaches yourself to stave off fatigue. That, or dip into the main story.

Far Cry 3's main missions are nothing special in and of themselves, and include one or two exhausting slogs and limp stealth sections, but the campaign does a better job than *Far Cry 2*'s storyline when it comes to providing an alternative to the open emergence of the player-authored escapades. Sure, it's liable to all go a bit surreal at times, with sequences that ram home the insanity theme, but its protagonists are sympathetic and charismatic, the villains are loathsome, and it frequently forces Jason into the kind of confined spaces that he never finds outside.

Regardless, *Far Cry 3* is at home in the jungle. Wild, reactive and unpredictable, it's where the series still feels so distinct from other FPSes. It's built from many of the usual ingredients, including guns, explosive barrels, and thoughtfully placed cover, as well as few less usual ones – tigers, for a start – but refuses to tell you how to approach things or what to do with them. Visiting Rook Islands is no package holiday, then, but it's a great place to make your own fun.

8

Post Script

Interview: Jeffrey Yohalem, lead writer

Far Cry 3 exchanges the dark otherworldliness of its predecessor for a narrative that can be equally surreal, but is more rooted in the world we know. There are pop cultural references aplenty, offset by a hyper-real atmosphere and a narrative that makes you question its protagonist's state of mind. We talked to **Jeffrey Yohalem**, the lead writer of *Far Cry 3*.



Jeffrey Yohalem, lead writer

How closely do you work with the design team?
It's an intensive, ongoing process involving the whole team. It's like putting together an organic jigsaw puzzle where you have all these different art forms [such as] level design and game design and art direction, and you have to take advantage of what they're working on rather than contradict it. Which I think has been a big problem in game development for a while – where the writer is constantly contradicting what's going on in the development of the game. If you're trying to tell a love story and the game's about shooting, the better the shooting becomes, the more it subverts the love story. I built a narrative around the desire to push shooting to the limit. It's possible with any game – I mean, the mechanics are the grammar, so you look at the mechanics. In every game I've done, the story has been about the mechanics, to the extent that if you mute it you'll see the same meaning you'll [get] with sound.

How do you feel about the tension in open-world games between a linear story and non-linear play?
I don't know if there's an all-purpose solution, because every story is different. But in *Far Cry*, the more the player goes and just does whatever it is they want to do, the better, because it supports the meaning of the game. Like, it's about the player's drive to explore this Neverland and stay in the game world.

Jason starts the game quite proficient. Do you think this is a narrative problem?
No, because the game is about videogames. So if it had been about someone who was learning to shoot in the wild and it had to be realistic, then that would have been the way to go. But in reality it's about the fact that the player is proficient with shooting already, because the player has played other shooters. So the player takes control of Jason and Jason actually comments about it, like, "Why am I so good at this?" Because the player's controlling him. So Jason's aware of the player, the player's aware of Jason. The player changes Jason, changes his objectives, and the story is about that.

So do you think stories that don't acknowledge the player are intrinsically flawed?
I think a lot of games ignore the player and it creates a cold feeling where you have this protagonist who is very charismatic but shoots lots of people or stabs lots of people – you know, is a serial killer. And the game pretends that the protagonist is not a serial killer. And so the game is basically ignoring everything the player does. I mean, that's the subtext of that – your actions don't matter to the story. Or they go way too overt and actually let the player choose the direction, but only at the moment the author decides [you can]. And what if I wanted a line to be delivered differently when I choose that dialogue choice? In reality, it's still not involving the player. So, for me, the way to truly involve the player is via whatever analogue controls the player has. And by analogue I mean anything that covers such a broad spectrum that I can perform using it. Like wall running in [*Prince Of Persia: The*] *Sands Of Time*. I can wall run, stop halfway through, drop down. I can jump back. There's all these ways I can interact with that system. It's the same thing with shooting a gun. So those are the analogue controls of the game, the analogue gameplay. Digital gameplay – on or off – doesn't allow you to express anything. Analogue mechanics are what the game and story has to be about.

I took my generation today and said, 'What is our hell? What's our conflict? What's facing us?'



There have been three very different *Far Cry* games now. What themes, if any, unify them?
I think we stayed faithful to what *Far Cry* is about. I loved the fun of *1*. For me, *3* is the ultimate expression of why I love *Far Cry*. [It] was about this fun, ridiculous narrative that I was super fascinated with until the aliens showed up. But until that moment it was like 'What's this mystery? What's the secret of this island?' It was like this weird, Dr Moreau thing and I thought it was neat. And I thought the fact that you were like a tourist was really refreshing. That shirt. The Hawaiian shirt. I liked that. Then, with *Far Cry 2*, there were the ideas about Heart Of Darkness and Apocalypse Now, and I liked that kind of thoughtfulness, but I wanted to combine it with the fun of the first game. For me, Apocalypse Now is about the destruction of the Vietnam generation. You know, it's all about the hell of Vietnam. So I took my generation today and said, 'What is our hell? What is our conflict? What's facing us?' And *Far Cry 3* is about that. It's about escapism, and about how society is this vast web that people have to navigate. Twenty-year-olds are facing this job market that's really bleak. They can't figure out how society functions. We were all taught that we can do anything, but this generation is coming up against this world that's structured around pyramid schemes that take advantage of young people to create while the older get to work less. And I think my generation goes 'Holy shit' when we're faced by this. And we escape. ■

PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale

Publisher SCE
Developer SCE Santa Monica, SuperBot Entertainment, Bluepoint Games (Vita)
Format PS3 (version tested), Vita
Release Out now

PlayStation 4 might not be officially announced yet, but *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale* is the closest Sony can get to throwing a retirement party for PS3 without putting up balloons. The game is a scrappy 2D brawler in the mould of Nintendo's *Super Smash Bros*, a frantic free-for-all of characters from different games that's been built as a celebration of the platform and its teeming, varied population.

And *All-Stars* feels like a celebration. Its energy comes from breaking down the barriers between fictional universes, jubilantly tipping the likes of Nathan Drake, Sackboy and Kratos into an arena like a box of mismatched toys. Worlds literally collide when the game-themed backgrounds break in on each other, such as when a giant Chimera from *Resistance* bursts through the *Ape Escape* lab, or the *Buzz!* studio erupts through a wall of *LittleBigPlanet* felt. And when players die, they disappear in impeccably branded explosions of triangles, circles, crosses and squares – PlayStation confetti for a special occasion.

The game underneath all the flag waving is deeper than a four-way mess of simultaneous attacks would suggest. Each of the characters has its own specific moveset, comprising three basic strikes that can then be modified by holding a direction. Take PaRappa The Rapper: a tap of triangle sees him swat enemies with his skateboard, pressing down and triangle triggers a sliding low jab, while up and triangle performs a spinning handstand to ward off aerial attacks. Add in similar variations on both square and circle, as well as throws, blocks and powerful weapon pickups (hedgehog grenades, rocket launchers, ancient Greek axes), and it should become clear that there are intriguing combat nuances to be found behind the stars onscreen.

In fact, there's a fully fleshed out stable of fighters, each designed with an appreciation for their origins. Such faithfulness is an achievement worth noting, since the 20 characters on the roster here are more disparate than *Smash Bros'* lineup. *Killzone*'s Colonel Radec and *MediEvil*'s Sir Daniel Fortesque aren't obvious sparring partners, but the trick is pulled off with a mix of playfulness and respect. Characters from fighting and action games, such as *God Of War*'s Kratos or *Tekken*'s Heihachi, retain trademark moves and can be played more or less conventionally, while less obvious candidates – Sackboy; PaRappa; Sony's cat-like Japanese mascot, Toro – have been armed with a mischievous range of innovative attacks.

Sackboy's a good example, epitomising *All-Stars* at its best. His moves imaginatively appropriate the creative work of a game that's not even violent, let alone based on brawling. Instead, inventive spirit becomes his armoury, using reflective panels to rebound attacks onto his enemies, summoning projectiles with a Popit menu and firing them with a conjured fan.

All-Stars seems less concerned with the fairness of its super attack system and more with how awesome the attacks look



There are less successful examples, and while none are outright bad, a few – such as *Heavenly Sword*'s Nariko – are decidedly straightforward. And, as things stand, there are some balancing issues: Kratos proved overly formidable during beta. Still, for the most part *All-Stars* has marshalled its cast to good effect.

One frustration is that mastering its characters doesn't directly lead to success. Landing regular blows tops up a power bar, which when filled earns the player access to a super attack – the only way to KO enemies and score points. Tactically, this means that matches are streamlined, with the frantic blow-by-blow fighting shaped by a hungry scramble to build your meter, and the only meaningful strategising dominated by the timing of super attacks. It also means that matches can feel incredibly unfair, since it's possible to charge super after super only to miss or to have the attack interrupted by either skill or a rogue strike emerging from the flailing sprawl of limbs into which four-way matches inevitably descend. This is grounds for justifiable whinging, but, of course, there's also a skill to deploying these super attacks successfully. It relies not only on timing and anticipation, but also on managing the patient game of risk and reward involving the power bar (is there time to secure enough power for a level-three attack, or is it best to unleash a low-level super now for a single kill?)

Throwing all this handwringing into sharp relief is the fact that *All-Stars* seems less concerned with the fairness of its super attack system and more with how awesome the attacks themselves look and sound. They're designed as violent love letters to the characters who use them and the worlds they inhabit. The level-three attacks in particular facilitate a full-on invasion of *All-Stars* by its fighters' home titles, with Kratos hulking up to Titan size and thudding destructively across the arena in a few steps, *DmC*'s redesigned Dante flashing into overdrive and stealing the show with a shock of the platinum blond hair he'll grow as an older man, and Sackboy filling the screen with *LittleBigPlanet* score bubbles that trap opponents, leaving them floating helplessly to be popped at your platforming leisure.

These finishers are imaginative and spectacular, and discovering them is one of the game's chief pleasures. Whether it has enough quality to retain interest past this rush of novelty is another matter. *All-Stars* is torn in two directions, a balancing act of fighting nous and arcade kicks. It delivers a sophisticated system of combos and then subjects it to constant interruption by its own multiplayer maelstrom. There's an unexpected clarity to solo play that's lost amid the tumult of human competition, but what's never obscured – and what stands as its great accomplishment – is its fond and intricate celebration of all things PlayStation. **7**

RIGHT Each character has a similar set of moves, but there are notable differences between them. Colonel Radec's gun-heavy repertoire is best for ranged combat, while Dante's blade-heavy approach suits those who prefer to get in close







ABOVE It's hard not to see Raiden's appearance as a nod to *Super Smash Bros*'s inclusion of *Metal Gear* cohort Snake, although the cyborg's turn here probably owes more to raising awareness for *Metal Gear Rising* than it does to heartfelt platform loyalty. LEFT Choosing a lineup is not an exact science, but original PlayStation platform hero Crash Bandicoot is a notable absentee. The rights to the character currently belong to Activision – let's not rule out paid DLC, then

BELOW *All-Stars* reaches for robust, competition-level credibility with combos and an evasion system, but fourplayer free-for-alls are so frantic that it's hard to stay on top of the fray, and difficult to see how even advanced players could impose themselves on the chaos





Infamous's Cole is split into good and evil versions, but *All-Stars'* genius is often in how it mashes heroes together

Post Script

Uniting universes

Whether or not it works convincingly as a serious fighting game, the mainstream pull of *PlayStation All-Stars Battle Royale* is as a cross-universe carnival, a junking of regular boundaries allowing usually incompatible characters to measure up against each other.

In this way, it's most obviously following in the footsteps of *Super Smash Bros* and, more recently, *Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two*, which is notable for bringing together different strands of the notoriously guarded Disney universe. In fact, *Epic Mickey* acts as a fictional codification of that universe, explaining the absence and disuse of several characters – most visibly Mickey Mouse's predecessor Oswald The Lucky Rabbit – through the invention of an animation purgatory called The Cartoon Wasteland.

Its creator, Warren Spector, has spoken about the various rules and restrictions of building a cross-pollinated world with Disney's tightly protected properties. These range from the inexplicable – Spector was forbidden from showing Mickey's teeth – to the logical, such as the dictat that characters from different Disney universes – Simba, Ariel, Pongo – cannot exist in the same space.

This ordered division seems a long way from the jumbled abandon of *All-Stars*, where there are no strict rules governing character interactions. Instead, this is a game that revels in frantic free-for-all chaos, casting realistically drawn heroes, such as Nathan Drake and Cole MacGrath, in with the cartoon warmth of Toro or the two-dimensional rhythm action star PaRappa The Rapper. Disney's cartoons are at least all cartoons, consistent in form despite differing styles.

This eclecticism provides the sharpest point of difference between *All-Stars* and *Super Smash Bros*. *All-Stars* is messier, faster, and feels somehow more transgressive – these are characters who really don't belong together. The game plays up to the impact that such clashes can have, too, making elements from various games collide violently in the arenas. Walls are symbolically broken here, and coherence tossed on the pyre.

Even without the coherence of Nintendo's game, the fact that *All-Stars* exists at all tells us something about the ambition of the PlayStation brand. It's reaching for the unity of Nintendo's output, even if it's rife with conflicting impulses rather than easy all-ages appeal. On the other hand, it's hard to see Xbox attempting anything similar (at least, without relying even more heavily on cross-platform characters to fill the slots between Master Chief and Marcus Fenix).

For all the inconsistency in its lineup, though, *All-Stars* displays some deft touches when it comes to the specifics of character interaction. These are the welded joints between game worlds, and, for the most part, take the form of pre-boss-battle feuds, whereby unlikely stars are paired off for a grudge match. For instance, *BioShock*'s Little Sister prompts a battle between Sackboy and Big Daddy by falling in love with Media Molecule's cuddly mascot, while Kratos comes to blows with Sweet Tooth when he knocks over the murderous clown's ice cream.

The best of all these self-aware moments is the identity of the game's final boss. Perhaps not instantly recognisable to European and Japanese gamers, the big villain is Polygon Man, the aborted marketing mascot of PlayStation's American arm. He was jettisoned before the launch of the original PlayStation on the orders of Ken Kutaragi, who rejected the idea of alternative territorial branding. He's a wonderful symbol of the schisms that characterise both Sony's corporate structure and the game that has been designed to celebrate its output, and demonstrates that while *All-Stars* might lack the depth of Disney or Nintendo's IP parties, it's been approached with humour and a welcome self-deprecating grace. ■

Natural Selection II

Natural Selection II's combatants are opposed to each other in more ways than one. They fight, sure, scrapping to control the large interconnected maps that the multiplayer shooter calls home. But they're different, right down to their DNA.

On one side are the humans. Marines, to be specific, clad in camo green and armed with Aliens-esque pulse rifles. The marines are tough, durable and handled from a firstperson viewpoint. By default, they're armed with a rifle, pistol, and pocket-sized axe, and in groups of two or three form a lethal fighting force. But not all marines are equal. One will – by impromptu election or opportunism – become Commander, a position that affords them an RTS-style view of the map. From this perch, the Commander can place structures and set waypoints. Structures provide upgrades and weapons for the grunts on the ground, and the waypoints suggest where they should concentrate their firepower next.

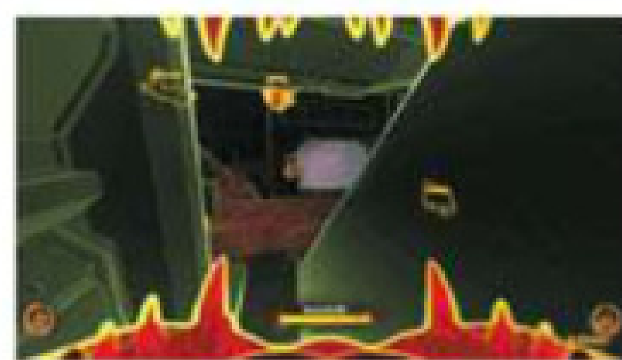
Their war is with *Natural Selection II*'s aliens. Named the Kharaa, they're in turn gooey and chitinous, distillations and amalgamations of aliens in other media. The Skulk is their basic frontline troop, a hog-sized, spine-footed ankle-biter that can climb walls and excels as a hit-and-run ambusher. Players start as Skulks, but can evolve into larger beasts. The Fade is one, a man-sized mantis monster that's able to phase out of visibility and hurtle forward to unfurl its two-foot-long claws into a marine's guts. Near the top of the food chain is the Onos, an elephantine tank armed with a wicked horn. One step further up sits the alien Commander. Where his marine counterpart needs soldiers to build his structures, the alien Commander takes a more direct approach, placing resource collectors and defensive towers to grow on their own.

The two sides are thrust into conflict by the need to gather finite resources, studded across *Natural Selection II*'s maps. In their natural state, they're small holes in the ground spewing forth a wispy blue light. For either the humans or the aliens to capture them, they need to build a resource collection structure on one, and then defend it if the opposite team tries to take it. The more resources a team has, the more its Commander can spend on upgrades for the entire group, and the more go into each player's personal pool to buy new weapons for marines, or evolutions for aliens.

The result is a tense battle of push and pull. You'll need to push in groups of marines to beat back the spread of alien buildings and the glowing orange spores that sustain them; you'll pull as the Skulks, luring fragile humans into ambush spots and leaping out en masse to surround them. Each side's footsoldiers are easily killed when separated from the group, and it's only towards the end of the game that your upgrades or weapons will be far enough along the tech tree to offer serious survivability. Humans get jetpacks and mech suits, while the mighty Onos takes the contents of an ammo dump to bring down.

Publisher Unknown Worlds Entertainment
Developer In-house
Format PC
Release Out now

NSII's combat is what it needs to be: tense, vicious and scrappy. It demands careful application of your firepower



GORGE YOURSELF
Alien evolutions include the flying Lerk, and the support-providing Gorge. The former is an aerial hit-and-run unit, able to glide out of trouble and flap up to the rafters to support its team via the rapid-fire spines launched from its wings. But it's the Gorge that's one of the aliens' most useful units. While offensively useless, the Gorge can build small clusters of defensive structures, or heal friendlies. A successful alien team will usually have a Gorge or two at the back, scooting around on four legs to tidy up cuts in the battle lines or offer succour to their teammates.

Combat is perfunctory rather than punchy. Aliens don't flinch when hit with a rifle round, collapsing into a slump only when their hit points have run out. There's little direct feedback about a target's health either, which can be especially problematic when you're unloading a weapon into an Onos's rump, desperately hoping to fell it before it blows out the final light source. Hurting a target as a low-lying Skulk is fundamentally unsatisfying, too, your view moving too fast for a leg-level bite to feel powerful.

It's not on a par with rival straight-up multiplayer shooters, then, but *Natural Selection II*'s combat is what it needs to be: tense, vicious and scrappy. Playing successfully demands careful application of your firepower. It's as much about strategy as it is spraying, as much tactics as it is targeting. With an Onos in your base, do you pull back to defend, or continue an assault on an alien hive? As a Skulk, do you make a kamikaze dive towards two marines harassing a frontline resource collector, or sit back, lose it and wait for help?

Outside the pressures of the conflict itself, *Natural Selection II*'s community is refreshingly friendly. Perhaps it's an attitude born of familiarity – the game was in playable alpha for the best part of a year – or perhaps it's a byproduct of the unique FPS/RTS mechanics. One player, however badly he or she plays, is never anything less than a benefit to the team. But it's in the public interest to help new people, and acquaint them with *Natural Selection II*'s complexities – of which there are many – to better aid the group.

Those same mechanics also orchestrate the game's biggest problem: the time it takes to close a match. It quickly becomes obvious when the tide has turned, when one side has obtained the upper hand through superior shooting or deft commanding. The next five minutes are then spent watching as the winning side systematically dismantles the losers' infrastructure, undoing their hard work with a wave of forced, tiresome destruction. During this final whitewashing, balance questions can be raised: the Onos has been tweaked to allow for increased survivability, and all too often it can spell doom for a team not perfectly equipped to repel its assault. Naturally, this imbalance may well be further altered by the engaged, attentive development team, which is made up of fans of the original *Half-Life* mod.

Natural Selection II's beautiful asymmetry is only bent out of shape by the time it takes for matches to conclude. Lose badly and it's a long loss to endure. Win well and it can feel like crushing a bug – needless and cruel. The game leading up to either of those outcomes, though, is captivating, strategic and, despite the monstrous aliens, oddly welcoming.

8





ABOVE The Kharaa can destroy localised power sources to plunge rooms into darkness. This provides a clear advantage because the aliens have vision modes that make navigation easy in the gloom, and marines do not





TOP Marines are exponentially more powerful in groups. *Natural Selection II*'s guns are potent enough to kill Skulks quickly, but the dog-sized monsters are so fast that it's helpful to have backup. **ABOVE** The more players building, the faster the structure will be completed. The Kharaa don't need their grunts to construct buildings, but simply to protect them as they morph into form. **LEFT** A few swift Skulk bites will end a basic marine's life. Soon enough, though, the humans will have body armour, better weapons, and, at the top of the tree, even exoskeletons to protect them

Call Of Duty: Black Ops: Declassified

Activision promised that this would be "a true *Call Of Duty* experience" on Vita. Perhaps it should have told Nihilistic Software, which has made something that resembles *Call Of Duty* in the same way that a movie trailer resembles a feature-length film. As a far smaller package, the intention is clear: *Declassified* is meant to be *Call Of Duty: The Edited Highlights*. It's a pity, then, that Nihilistic's aim is as wonky as it makes yours – the latter a result of temperamental right-stick control and capricious auto-targeting.

The fragmented story is designed to fill the gap between both *Black Ops* games, with Alex Mason and Frank Woods embarking upon a series of clandestine missions. The objectives are familiar: shoot the bad guys, rescue the hostages, retrieve the documents and then go home. Few, however, would expect to be returning from this globe-trotting adventure quite so quickly.

Its episodic setup is designed to fit its host device, yet if the pitch is a *COD* you can play on the toilet, then it soon becomes clear that *Declassified*'s singleplayer portion won't take many loo breaks to finish. Each of the ten objectives is over in under five minutes, although the absence of checkpoints ensures the one-hour playtime may extend as far as two, or even three at a push. The structure isn't necessarily a bad idea in and of itself: it's quite clearly geared towards repeat plays for high scores. But while three difficulty settings and star ratings might encourage replay value in a better game, it's difficult to see anyone returning to this.

The problems are manifold. The story is a limp mess of witless and profane dialogue barked between angry men, stitched clumsily together with interstitial clips that labour to provide narrative motivation. Basic character movement feels awkward; you can tweak the sensitivity, but the skittish default setting is soon made sluggish, with seemingly no happy medium. An auto-sprint encourages a brisk, aggressive approach to combat, yet running and gunning is often a recipe for instant death. Happily, Nihilistic has avoided the traditional view-obscuring jam splatter when hit, but the faint splash of red that appears when you're wounded is so inefficient at communicating low health that it's constantly chaperoned by a text warning.

You'll need to spend a fair amount of time stopping and popping, then, though that has little to do with enemy intelligence. You might retreat from a grenade, only to witness the thrower jog over to where it landed and then fly haplessly past you when it explodes. Step into the next room and you'll probably see another soldier determinedly shooting a wall at point-blank range, or pointing their weapon at a suspicious-looking door. You'll rarely be surprised either, even with the fuzzy graphics doing their best to camouflage distant foes: many enemies loudly announce their presence by firing round after round into empty corridors before they could possibly have caught wind of your arrival. And with night vision enabled, you can merely see when an enemy is aiming his rifle at a wall, while another crouches with his back to the entrance.

Despite their stupidity, these soldiers still cause problems through sheer numbers. The situation's not helped by the decision to restrict the use of secondary weapons to touchscreen commands. Throwing a grenade involves you releasing your thumb from the right stick before dragging it to its intended landing spot on the touchscreen. It's as instinctive as it sounds, and that's before enemy gunfire disrupts your aim. Flashbangs, meanwhile, are so potent that they're as likely to cloud your vision as that of your enemy in all but the most open areas. You can tap to return grenades to sender, but even this is unreliable – you may find you've simply dropped one at your feet instead.

This all ensures you'll rarely complete a mission in one attempt, with difficulty spikes and cheap tactics also forcing restarts; a group of analysts may blithely ignore Mason's request to "keep your heads down" during a close-range shootout, while a sudden explosion – a booby-trapped body? A glitch? – might just kill them on your next attempt.

Multiplayer is present, but correct would be a stretch. Connecting to a game can be a lottery. A patch has improved matters, but errors and glitches are still frequent, and menus treacle-slow. A great many awkward, short-lived firefights greet you when you do manage to connect. So tiny are the maps that Nihilistic has seemingly nerfed the aiming to ensure you last longer than a few seconds, though you'll sometimes spawn in enemy territory and die before you've lifted your gun from your hip. There's no room for subtlety here, and the currency *Declassified* deals in is the rat-a-tat-tat of machine gun fire. Again, the idea is sensible – you want to be in the thick of the action quickly, and respawning is fairly swift, but one word springs to mind: compromise.

That's not what Vita owners will want to hear, but they're growing wearily accustomed to it. The unspoken promise of Sony's portable is console quality on the move, but a thoroughly bloodless version of a massive franchise only feels like going back on that word. This wasn't what Jack Tretton had in mind when he talked about having "a triple-A shooter in the palm of your hands". Rather, *Declassified* is a single A: awful.

2

Publisher Activision
Developer Nihilistic Software
Format Vita
Release Out now

The absence of checkpoints ensures the one-hour playtime may extend as far as two, or even three at a push



DIREFIGHT
Beyond the brief campaign, there's a clutch of frightfully dull time trials with wooden cutouts to blast. Elsewhere, the obligatory Horde mode, Hostiles, offers a fleetingly amusing reminder of the boneheaded AI. The first few waves obligingly stand still as you jab the touchscreen to instantly kill them with the world's deadliest knife, and other grunts ignore the option of gunning you down at close quarters to sprint past you for the safety of a waist-high wall.







ABOVE It's an ugly game, though the lack of texture detail keeps it running swiftly. But the engine struggles with anything more spectacular, so it's a good job grenades explode with all the force of a pound-shop party popper

TOP Hostiles mode is perhaps the best choice for unintentional comedy. The third stage features a small room that you can hole up in for the duration, since enemies will politely file into your sightline to receive their lead-based reward. ABOVE Shoot one soldier, you've shot them all, an old adage that proves particularly true here given the regularly repeated and rather generic character models. RIGHT While throwing grenades in combat is fussy, some of the touchscreen additions are sensible enough. For instance, you can deploy mortars by simply tapping your target. However, this means the conclusion to the second campaign mission feels decidedly anticlimactic, seeing you listlessly prod coloured triangles to take out four MIGs before they can take off



Scribblenauts Unlimited

An omniscient fictional gnome. A volcanic moccasin. A fleshy rainbow gargoyle. When 2010's *Super Scribblenauts* added adjectives to the original's already bursting lexicon of words that could be made real, it brought a new level of depth to the game's already unparalleled ability to generate non sequiturs. The hook for *Unlimited* is that you can now add your very own words and associations.

Unlimited's setup is simple – having played a trick on an old man, Maxwell finds his sister cursed to slowly petrify. The only way he can save her is by doing good with his magic notebook, which creates any object you write in it. You have to feel for Lily, who essentially lives the role of a princess needing saving, slowly being encased in rock and left to watch as Maxwell goes off and has adventures. Especially when those adventures are frequently funny and at times oddly affecting.

Rather than the defined level scenarios of previous *Scribblenauts*, now many small puzzles are dotted around expansive themed areas, including a forest, a desert, and a haunted house. Presented on PC and Wii U in beautiful HD, the levels are finely detailed and sprawl across multiple levels – up skyscrapers, underground and into the clouds. But while previous games' puzzles offered the chance to explore multiple solutions, now you can only offer a single answer before you're done. They therefore come thick and fast, their contexts and premises sketching out mini stories that end with a payoff. There's a Shoggoth under a city pier that wants to know what it looks like (it's appalled when it finds out); there's a necromancer wanting to resurrect the creature that is now a set of giant crystal bones (and it's consigned to be harried by the magician's attentions forever if you do); there's a kleptomaniac penguin who wants to steal a diamond from a museum (we're not sure why helping it is an act of good).

The result is a series of one-liners, most of which only require a single word before you go onto the next, which removes the in-depth creative thinking that the first game required. It makes *Unlimited* snappier, but you also feel as if you're skating over its surface. The potential for emergent comedy is greater, however. The open nature of the levels can lead to cascading series of events, with, say, the woman who wants to restart her crash test dummy's heart ending up shooting a nearby arsonist with the electrostatic gun we mistakenly gave her in place of a defibrillator. Sometimes objects, such as a magic mirror, create other objects or shoot projectiles that infect their targets with random adjectives, all of which cause chaotic chain reactions as flaming headless horsemen rampage and epidemics leave every NPC made of felt, or dead, and you needing to reset the level to continue.

And yet there's a strangely dislocated nature to your role in *Unlimited*. Asked to help an archaeologist figure out which of a set of treasures is fake, your task is to give him the tools to do so rather than work it out yourself. And you rarely need to involve yourself in the game's reasonably robust physics system; simply thinking up the correct object is usually enough. It serves to emphasise Maxwell's slightly problematic place in the game, too. Because you can spawn and place objects anywhere, he's often left off-screen as you scroll around looking for the next task, but there are points when he does need to be nearby, such as when you want to edit an adjective on an NPC or object. Then he becomes an encumbering appendage that you'll grant the 'flying' adjective just to ease the irritation of navigating him around. Only rarely do the puzzles play with the idea of having you work out how to get him to locations. The presence of sharks that will kill him as he opens an undersea chest is trifling because you can merely make them 'peaceful', and few levels have secret routes you have to find to access closed off areas.

Publisher Warner Bros Entertainment
Developer 5th Cell
Format 3DS, PC (version tested), Wii U
Release Out now (US), TBA (Europe)

There's a Shoggoth under a city pier that wants to know what it looks like (it's appalled when it finds out)



It's not a difficult game, then. Challenge instead comes when it sets you oblique goals – how would you help a schoolgirl meet 'someone in the middle of their career'? Or 'help the monster integrate into society'? The fact that the game's so accommodating with your responses is at the heart of why *Scribblenauts* is so gratifying – finding it has the same understanding of the world as you still has a thrill. Not that the system's faultless. It won't recognise a stuntman as a Hollywood resident; the carnivorous plant won't eat the dead dog we offer it. On the other hand, the sheer flexibility of it all can undermine any carefully set up conundrum. Asked to create three ancient things you'd find in an undersea lost city, you can simply name any object 'ancient' to win. To mitigate this, the game sometimes arbitrarily stops you from being able to edit adjectives.

Most of these problems only really apply to those expecting *Scribblenauts Unlimited* to behave with the rigour of a traditional puzzle game. In the hands of the less object-orientated – namely children – such difficulties fade as the game becomes a V8 engine for creativity and roleplay. Its levels start stories that players can then continue, with the Object Editor offering the chance to add whatever they like to its dictionary. With *Unlimited* supported by Internet sharing tools, the chance to see and toy with other players' creations adds even greater breadth. It's enough to highlight that *Unlimited* lacks a scripting system for you to create your own scenarios, a puzzle editor, or the chance to video your exploits. With them, it'd be a exemplary 2D director's studio. As it stands, you can only cast your actors and dress your sets, so *Unlimited* doesn't quite live up to its name, but for those willing to span the game's structural deficiencies with their imagination, it's intensely rewarding. **7**



LEFT We're still not sure quite how this pandemonium started, but it involved a magic mirror, an evil clone and us simply attempting to do some good for the world. BELOW *Unlimited* is full of pop culture references. The pirate ship has a puzzle called "Where can I find some sailors?", for instance; elsewhere we enjoyed a Dune nod, and, of course, there's a "clever girl" quote relating to dinosaurs. BOTTOM The farm is where Lily's plight slowly worsens while you collect the Starites needed to cure her. For a game as welcoming and child-friendly as this, though, it's disappointing that you can't play through it with a female avatar



ABOVE The Richard Scarry-like environments are so busy that it's often hard to see the available puzzles, so you'll need engage Maxwell's Starite Vision in order to highlight the objects and characters linked to tasks





Disney Epic Mickey 2: The Power Of Two

For all its faults, you could hardly accuse Warren Spector's *Epic Mickey* of playing it safe. Its dark, twisted vision dared to scratch away the colourful surface of Walt's world to reveal the rotting black heart pulsing beneath. This startling treatment of a pop icon – and the novelty of its unusual setting, the Cartoon Wasteland – carried *Epic Mickey* a long way past the reasonable complaints about its errant camera, awkward exploration and simplistic quest design.

How disappointing, then, that Junction Point should steer this sequel into gentler waters, all while making the same mistakes as last time. The camera might not be quite as wayward as in the Wii game, but it remains a bitter irony that a game developed in collaboration with the world's most famous animation house should have such issues framing its action effectively. An unreliable double-jump hardly helps matters, contributing to a persistent feeling that exploration is more laborious than it really should be.

Of course, as the title suggests, Mickey isn't alone this time. Oswald The Lucky Rabbit, the antagonist for much of the first game, is his unlikely companion as the pair attempt to uncover the secret behind a series of quakes that threaten to tear the Wasteland apart. Though the two rivals eventually settled their differences, it's still odd to see them team up, their seething resentment apparently entirely forgotten.

Indeed, the tone is generally much lighter, a shift perhaps dictated by commercial concerns. Yet if the desire was to create something more family-friendly, it's too inconsistent to work. There are moments here, particularly where the game's mechanical menagerie is concerned, when it's too dark for the very young, and the gloomy environments sit uncomfortably next to the whimsy elsewhere. Worse still, the dialogue has no zip, the humour has no punch, and the musical numbers are unforgivably poor for a Disney production.

That might not be such a problem had the developer managed to meaningfully expand upon the first game's ideas. Mickey again relies on paint and thinner to respectively create or destroy, but there's precious little development beyond the introduction of invisible ink as a stealthy option or an indelible variety to bypass corrosive hazards. New ideas do accompany Oswald – the rabbit's remote control used to zap enemies and power machinery – but having a second character does bring problems for lone players at least. Occasionally, your AI partner will automatically assist in dealing with enemies or environmental conundrums, while at other times a prod of a button is needed to nudge him into action. On too many occasions, however, he'll either refuse to help or be too far away to do so. Any platforming sequences that require use of Oswald's hover ability are challenging for all the wrong reasons.

Publisher Disney Interactive
Developer Junction Point
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested), Wii, Wii U
Release Out now

The dialogue has no zip, the humour has no punch, and the musical numbers are unforgivably poor for Disney



It's a pity, too, since there are multipart riddles here that require thought and skill to beat, and there's often more than one way to solve them. As a rule, thinner offers the easy way out, with the more constructive paint-based solutions requiring extra effort but giving greater rewards. Your actions have a more noticeable impact on environments and inhabitants this time, too, and the changes linger unless you return to rectify them. Yet because the 'right' way so often requires little more than extra busywork, you'll find the corner-cutting suggestions of the devil on your shoulder to be all too persuasive. And if that makes the next area a little less inviting, and the characters you meet more unfriendly, it's a price most will be prepared to pay.

Elsewhere, additional abilities allow you to conjure a television to distract enemies, or to lift key items, ready for pushing into position with squirts of paint. That's every bit as sluggish and awkward as it sounds, exacerbated by the constant need to refill your paint meter; the same goes for spraying larger enemies to pacify them. It's less problematic if you're using Move: Sony's wand makes for a fine surrogate Remote, being quicker and more precise than a right analogue stick, most noticeably during the occasional boss battle where speed is of the essence.

Not that the game is usually in much of a hurry. There are several sidelines to distract you from a rather fragmented narrative, and such a range of collectables that you might be convinced Rare had a hand in development. There are hidden outlines of Mickey and Oswald to photograph, costumes that increase your attack range and energy meters, scrap metal, E-tickets, film reels, pins and more besides. The upshot is a world that's stuffed with hiding places, even if they're rarely accessed by any method more sophisticated than thinning a wall or blowing it up.

They're fairly attractive walls, at least. Environments are expansive and often vividly realised, although they're neither as sharp nor as detailed as you'd hope on the HD consoles. This might not be an upscaled Wii game, but at times it looks that way. The side-scrolling interludes that link each area, meanwhile, are more aesthetically diverse, which is more than can be said for the rudimentary platforming within.

The Power Of Two may have fewer technical issues than its predecessor, but it's a less adventurous, less courageous, and overall less interesting game. It struggles to make you care about its world, and as a result its one big idea – that of the Wasteland reacting to your choices – feels decidedly flaccid. There may still be mileage in Spector's concept, but his team seems further than ever from realising it. Perhaps, as when Walt left Oswald behind to create his helium-voiced replacement, it's time for Disney to go back to the drawing board.

5







ABOVE There's a slapstick element to combat, since both players can hit each other – Oswald's boomerang limb attack is very easy to walk into. It's best avoided in tough battles, since enemies respawn if Mickey dies

TOP Returning to a previous area can be quite a trek – the Wasteland is a big place for a small 'toon. Fortunately, you can purchase shortcuts to get about, which are accessed by leaping into various projectors spread across the world. ABOVE You'll often find yourself far from the main hub and it can take time to make your way back, not least because the map isn't all that helpful. Points of interest have to be manually highlighted each time you check as well. RIGHT Certain pins can be combined to awaken Spirits that imbue Mickey and Oswald with additional powers. A paint meter that regenerates faster is a desirable ability, but with many Spirits requiring up to four pins to unlock, only the most thorough of players will be able to earn them



Fallblox

Fallblox, for all its candy floss colour and cheerful denizens, is a puzzle game filled with cruel horrors. Not graphic frights: Intelligent Systems' art wouldn't look out of place decorating the walls of a well-to-do suburban nursery. Not thematic stress: the creepily trapped children of forebear *Pullblox* are gone, replaced by a lighter form of hostage – birds. Rather, *Fallblox* is a game of logical terrors, spatial conundrums that will drive the would-be solver to silent madness on the daily commute, and knotted ideas to foil the most experienced *Layton* graduate or *Tetris* aficionado.

As with *Pullblox*, the aim is to rearrange a series of blocky structures in order to create a staircase up to a summit, where a brightly coloured bird awaits capture. The game's grand invention – and in a puzzle game's finely balanced machinery, any such change has a big effect – is the introduction of gravity to the equation. Now structures will fall to the ground (or onto your squat character's resilient head) when any supporting set of blocks is manoeuvred away. Challenge is derived from the set of relationships between the blocks onscreen as you push and pull them, flipping the camera around in order to make sense of the 3D space and rearranging levels in search of the solitary solution.

BELOW The level reset button takes precedence in every scene – a giant glowing floor switch that's ready to clear your failures away and reinstate the original setup whenever your incorrect choices preclude a solution

Publisher Nintendo
Developer Intelligent Systems
Format 3DS
Release Out now



BLAME HIS TOOLS
Papa Blox, your tutor, introduces a range of different tools and gadgets as play continues to keep the puzzles fresh. *Portal*-esque potholes, doors, floating platforms and move switches all add complexity to the core template. By the end of the game's puzzles, the number of systems in play can be almost overwhelming at times. Despite the welcoming kindergarten visuals, this is a demanding game that will tax the most experienced puzzle addict.

It is, as with the previous game, an ingenious premise backed by smart puzzle designs – 100, all told. Nevertheless, there's a sense that Intelligent Systems is struggling to keep a firm hand on the possibility space. In *Fallblox*'s earliest stages, it's straightforward to plot the required movements to clear a stage. Even if you can't perceive exactly what to do right from the off, a little trial and error will soon make the way clear. But the learning curve takes a sharp incline after the first 20 levels (dubbed 'Lessons') are completed. It's a fact acknowledged by the in-game tutor. He apologises for the jump, and suggests that if you find yourself stuck, you simply move on to the next puzzle, or (patronisingly) head to 'Training', which is another series of levels at a reduced difficulty level.

The issues in the difficulty curve are made all the more pertinent because, outside of its light tutorials, the game offers little in the way of true training or lessons, instead taking a hands-off approach and hoping that you will learn by doing. For tenacious players and those inclined towards the genre, *Fallblox* could prove an irresistible draw, with clearing its parade of cryptic conundrums a delicious prospect. For others, the game's difficulty, and its visual and thematic linearity, will prove tiresome, their enthusiasm for its self-evident ingenuity petering out before each of its challenges has fallen.

7







PLAYSTATION ALL-STARS BATTLE ROYALE





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Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed

Sonic & All-Stars Racing Transformed is an edgier, more subversive take on *Mario Kart 7*'s hyper-polished karting, with handling that recalls the satisfying heft of *Blur*'s vehicles, and deforming tracks that bring a little of *Split Second*'s Hollywood spectacle to proceedings. Those tracks have a more vital role than simply boggling the eye, however, also supporting *Transformed*'s central gimmick: each racer's vehicle can shift between kart, boat and plane modes. It's a process that's triggered automatically when you pass through blue transformation gates, accompanied by a sound that might make a Hasbro lawyer's ears tingle.

Sumo's track designs are deliriously creative, the third lap often wildly different to the first; new routes open up regularly, and debris obstructs older paths. As fan service, the game excels, digging deep into Sega's roster of colourful characters and going well beyond the obvious track settings. So you'll find Sonic and Tails rubbing shoulders with BD Joe, Amigo and Ulala, while courses take in the sights of *Jet Set Radio*, *Panzer Dragoon* and even *Burning Rangers*.

Weapons are, for the most part, well balanced and fun to use. They include fire-from-the-hip projectiles (ice and fireworks), speed boosts (an overheating hotrod engine that must be dumped before it blows up) and *Transformed*'s blue shell equivalent, the leader-targeting Swarm. You can defend against attacks, too, letting you take the sting out of them with timing.

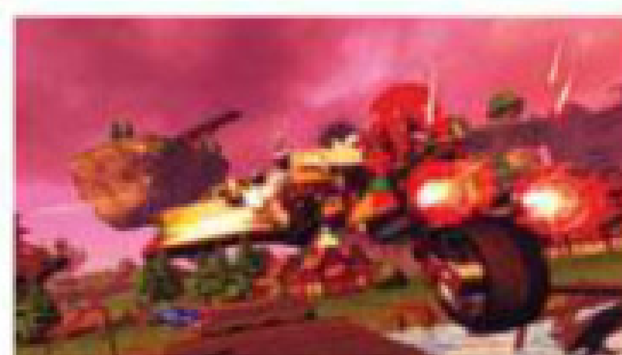
Characters are now unlocked in a career mode, which includes challenges such as Boost Rush (keep boosting to freeze the clock) and one-on-one versus rounds alongside the standard ten-kart races. There's a set of four-course grand prix, too, as well as single races and time trials – a worthwhile distraction thanks to the stacking boost levels you gain from a prolonged drift.

As a package, it's generous and deep, but Sumo has fallen victim to its own success. While enjoyable in their own right, boats and planes simply can't match the moreish handling of the karts. As such, you'll find yourself longing for a blue gate on tracks that keep you on the water or in the air for long periods.

And those incredibly detailed environs are sometimes so busy and colourful that the track is hard to see. That's a problem eased by learning courses, but targeting opponents and avoiding projectiles while negotiating a particularly challenging switchback at speed can be too much. Even so, Sumo deserves recognition for keeping the framerate so smooth.

Transformed's a less consistent offering than Mario's recent 3DS milestone, then, but there's a solid, energetic kart racer under all its nostalgic livery. **7**

Publisher Sega
Developer Sumo Digital
Format 360, PC, PS3 (version tested), Wii U, Vita
Release Out now (PC version TBC)



FASTEST THING ALIVE
While *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing*'s returning tracks are almost unchanged in form, *Transformed*'s new circuits are considerably more boisterous. A *Skies Of Arcadia* track sees the route gradually torn to pieces by cannon fire as a battle rages overhead until you're forced to fly through it yourself. And the *Nights Into Dreams* track deserves special mention, switching between Nightopia and Nightmare, and aping the Saturn classic's level structure.

BELOW While transformations are triggered at predefined points, there are often two gates to choose from. Flying is slightly faster than other modes, while a trickier route usually lets you change earlier, offering an advantage



Little Inferno

Burning things is fun. And that's good, because there's nothing else to do in *Little Inferno*. More toy than game, Tomorrow Corporation's debut title shares a physics-based playfulness with *World Of Goo*, which one of its founders helped create, but takes a torch to that game's goal-oriented structure. Instead, *Little Inferno* is all about the simple pleasure of stacking items high and watching as they collapse and burn.

As the owner of a Little Inferno Entertainment Fireplace, you're invited to order items from an ever-growing catalogue and dump them in a furnace. Each item is, in essence, a gag – some self-referential, some satirical, and others just plain surreal – and there's amusement to be had in unwrapping each new toy and seeing what will happen when you add flame to it. For example, coffee cups scream in protest, while small planets catch surrounding items in their gravitational pull before everything burns up in a windmill of fire. There's a dark undertone to *Little Inferno*'s anti-consumerism, perfectly captured by the cutesy grotesquery of Kyle Gabler's art style, which makes innocent children look like bug-eyed goblins and turns rabbit plushies into rotten-toothed wheezing monstrosities. It's found in subtle details, too, such as the way an unburned doll's eyes will anxiously trace the arc of your flame-creating cursor around the screen.

A simple, touching story offers a distraction from all the combustion, told by letters that occasionally appear in your rack of items waiting to be burned. These messages come from a select cast of characters, and slowly drip-feed trivia about the world beyond the fireplace in the familiar, surreal tones of *World Of Goo*'s sign painter. More importantly, perhaps, they set up the unexpected and memorable final scenes.

Little Inferno's chief problem isn't its shallow interactivity, but the way it arbitrarily gates your progress, forcing you to discover specific combos of items based on oblique hints before you can progress. They're an effective way to stop players rushing through the slight tale, perhaps, but these challenges can turn a diverting toy into an obscure and boring game.

There's a joke being played in *Little Inferno*, and we're not quite sure who's the butt of it. Social games get satirised via both flavour text and mechanics, since you're forced to wait minutes for your deliveries to arrive, unless you pay in in-game stamps to speed things up. But at times it seems like you're being mocked for choosing digital coal shovelling over the real world. There's enough charm here for *Little Inferno* to get by, but sometimes you might consider taking its advice and stop feeding the flames.

6

Publisher Tomorrow Corporation
Developer In-house
Format Mac, PC, Wii U
Release Out now



FIRE SALE
Each section of *Little Inferno*'s catalogue is themed, and it's the game part (First Person Shopper) that gets the most laughs, with Tomorrow Corp inviting you to destroy its staff's previous work as well its peers' creations. The game's anti-casual attitude is also at its most explicit here. A tablet "comes with free games that will cost you thousands", for instance, while a casual game's description sarcastically exclaims "if only winning were this easy in real life".

BELOW **Part of the fun of *Little Inferno* is the way its various items interact in the fireplace. In this case, we've ignited an amplifier, which is pumping out music while a zombie growls in protest as the flames draw near**



create

Lifting the lid on the art, science and business of making games



This issue's People, Places, Things gets underway on p118 when we meet up with Mark Long, the CEO of Meteor, who talks about his past experience with real-life railguns, and how working for the Department Of Defense inspired him to begin a career in gaming. We then jump (while crouching) straight into *Super Mario Bros'* Minus World on p120, the glitch that showed us nowhere is truly out of bounds in videogames. On p122, Things gives some love to Magikarp, the intentionally useless Pokémon. Studio Profile on p124 sees us catch up with Ubisoft Singapore, a multicultural studio that's bolstered big-name games. In The Making Of... on p128, we look at *Velocity*'s tumultuous backstory and how FuturLab made dynamic changes to the space shooter genre. The Art Of... on p132 enters into the harsh world of *Spec Ops: The Line*, a game that's deeply interested in its characters' progression, not just the player's. As always, our Create columnists have the final word, with designer Tadhg Kelly (p136) explaining the importance of staying relevant and not spiralling into subculture scenes, while Valve's Clint Hocking (p138) looks at how changing the FPS waveform can amplify a player's experience. Randy Smith (p140) slips on some cans to talk about what the music market can teach us about managing digital content, and writer James Leach (p142) knows his memes, examining how videogames are becoming pop culture, and why getting a line into the Internet's collective consciousness is a total 'do want'.



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Ubisoft Singapore is heading up the development of *Ghost Recon Online*, despite the game not having an Asian server shard. Find out more on p124

People

MARK LONG

How the research labs of the Cold War inspired a life in games



Mark Long co-founded Zombie Studios before leaving for Meteor. "I'm interested in mentoring younger developers. When I began, I was very grateful for the help I got"

We probably shouldn't be surprised that **Mark Long**, the CEO of Meteor Entertainment, publisher of mech shooter *Hawken*, is talking about a giant, futuristic railgun. What does surprise us, however, is that the gun he's talking about is a real one.

"We had a cannon that was 210 feet long and shot bowling-pin shaped brass projectiles," says Long. "They were coming out of the barrel going 18-30 kilometres per second. They were coming out so fast they don't even come out solid – it's plasma by the time it hits. It went through those targets like butter, man. It took a week to set up. It was the most fun fucking thing in the world to shoot those experiments."

Although the *Hawken* team has certainly modelled a few railguns, we're disappointed to say that Long wasn't firing bolts of metal-turned-ionised gas at homogeneous steel targets in the name of videogame research. Before the game industry, he worked for a series of research labs in the late '80s and early '90s that, among other things, were contracted by the US Department Of Defense. It's here his fascination with the technology that powers videogames was kindled.

"Really, computer graphics were born out of defence research," he explains. "When I started, the state of the art was an F-14 simulator. But there was a visionary at DARPA who realised that we could build simulators for regular infantry and tank guys and network them. That project was called SIMNET." As part of his defence research, Long would play these war games professionally.

"Videogames are a lot more fun," Long jokes. "We played in realtime, so it was tedious. You'd play a two-week battle over a month, because you come in for eight hours at a time." Nonetheless, his time spent simulating real battles has affected his tastes today. "I do really appreciate the more simmy side of gaming," he admits. "I've got an interest in hardcore games. I really like *DayZ* because of its unforgiving nature. Maybe that's one reason I really like *Hawken*. It manages to combine the velocity and immediacy of firstperson shooters like *Call Of Duty*, but in a way it's a throwback to old-school mech sims."

Before Adhesive Games, Meteor and *Hawken*, however, Long started his own game studio with business partner Joanna Alexander. The pair had become disillusioned after their prototype videogame console was rejected by Hasbro, who'd commissioned it. "They killed the project because they weren't sure that games weren't a fad," he says, looking incredulous at the memory even now, some 20 years on.

It was while working on the project that Long first came into contact with primitive virtual reality technology. "The first time I tried a head-mounted display rig, I was blown away," he says. "You were inside the game, and as crude as the graphics were, the idea was super powerful."

Long would try to recapture this magic when he formed Zombie Studios, developing a game called *Locus* that saw players chasing a ball in a 3D space. "We had 3D audio, head-related functions like Doppler shift and absorption reflection. It was way ahead of its time and, of course, a huge failure as a result."

Long never lost interest in virtual reality and he is partly why Meteor and Adhesive have committed themselves so fully to the Oculus Rift headset. *Hawken* will support the Rift from launch, and the publisher has publicly backed its Kickstarter campaign.

Before he left for his new outfit, Long steered Zombie through 20 years of operation. Early on, however, he met Mitch Lasky, the venture capitalist who would go on to fund *League Of Legends* creator Riot Games. So when Lasky chose to invest in Adhesive and build a publishing arm for the studio, he contacted Long to be its head.

"Yeah, of course. We have a horrible track record in representing race in games"

Long often talks in business terminology, but always with genuine enthusiasm for his subject, something that couldn't be clearer when the conversation turns to his efforts to make a transmedia franchise out of *Hawken*. To many, the phrase might bring to mind tacky tie-in novellas, but to Long it's a concept with true storytelling potential. He's strict, however, about how such a project needs to be approached.

"You have to do the best version for each media," he explains. "For example, *Hawken* has no characters, right? You're in a mech. The bad approach would be to try to jam characters into that environment. The good version is putting the characters in a linear film or webseries and getting to explore it that way."

He also stresses the need to respect the talents of those working in other fields: "You produce a transmedia bible, a set of canon rules. And then you hand it to the designer and say, 'As long as you follow this, you can do whatever you want.'" He cites the Wachowskis' Animatrix spin-off as a positive example of such work: "Each design is widely different from the next in style, themes and pacing. At the same time, it's all The Matrix."

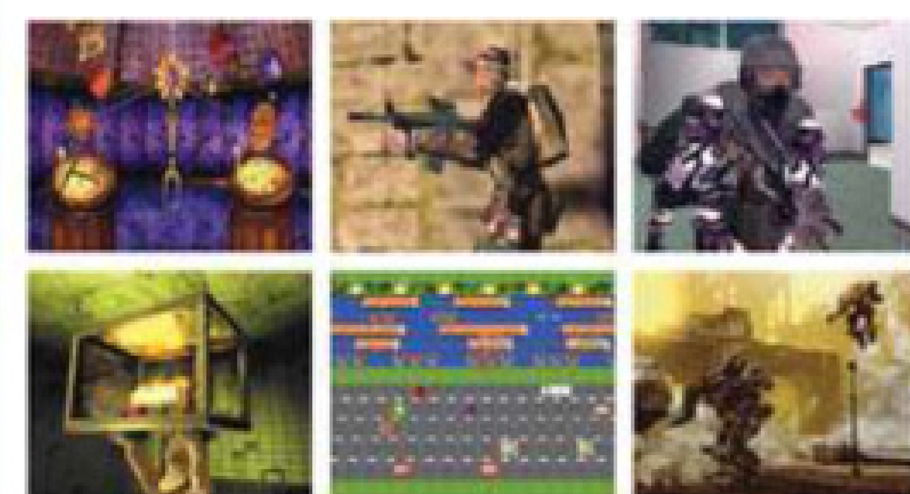
Long's interest in transmedia projects stems from his work outside of games. He's a New York Times bestselling author as a result of the graphic novel The Silence Of Our Friends, which tells the story of his father's radicalisation during his time as a TV station's race reporter in Texas in the late '60s. "He befriended a black radical. He brought them into our neighbourhood, the most racist neighbourhood in the city. The [Ku Klux Klan] put flyers on our door inviting us to rallies," he recalls.

We ask Long if he'd like to see the game industry's handling of race issues improve and get a quietly serious reply. "Yeah, of course. We have a horrible track record in representing race in games right now. The industry as a whole under-represents race and sex, and the short answer is absolutely yes. I'd like to be able to have [a positive] influence in future."

In the meantime, however, Long has the future of Meteor to worry about. *Hawken* has just launched, so it's a busy time, and there's the question of what the publisher might do next. "When I first sat down with Mitch and Khang [Le], we decided Meteor would be an arthouse publisher, in the same way that Miramax is an arthouse producer. We're going to be selective about what we produce and we're only going to do a little bit. We've got an eye on Kickstarter – it's a great breeding ground for innovation." ■

CV

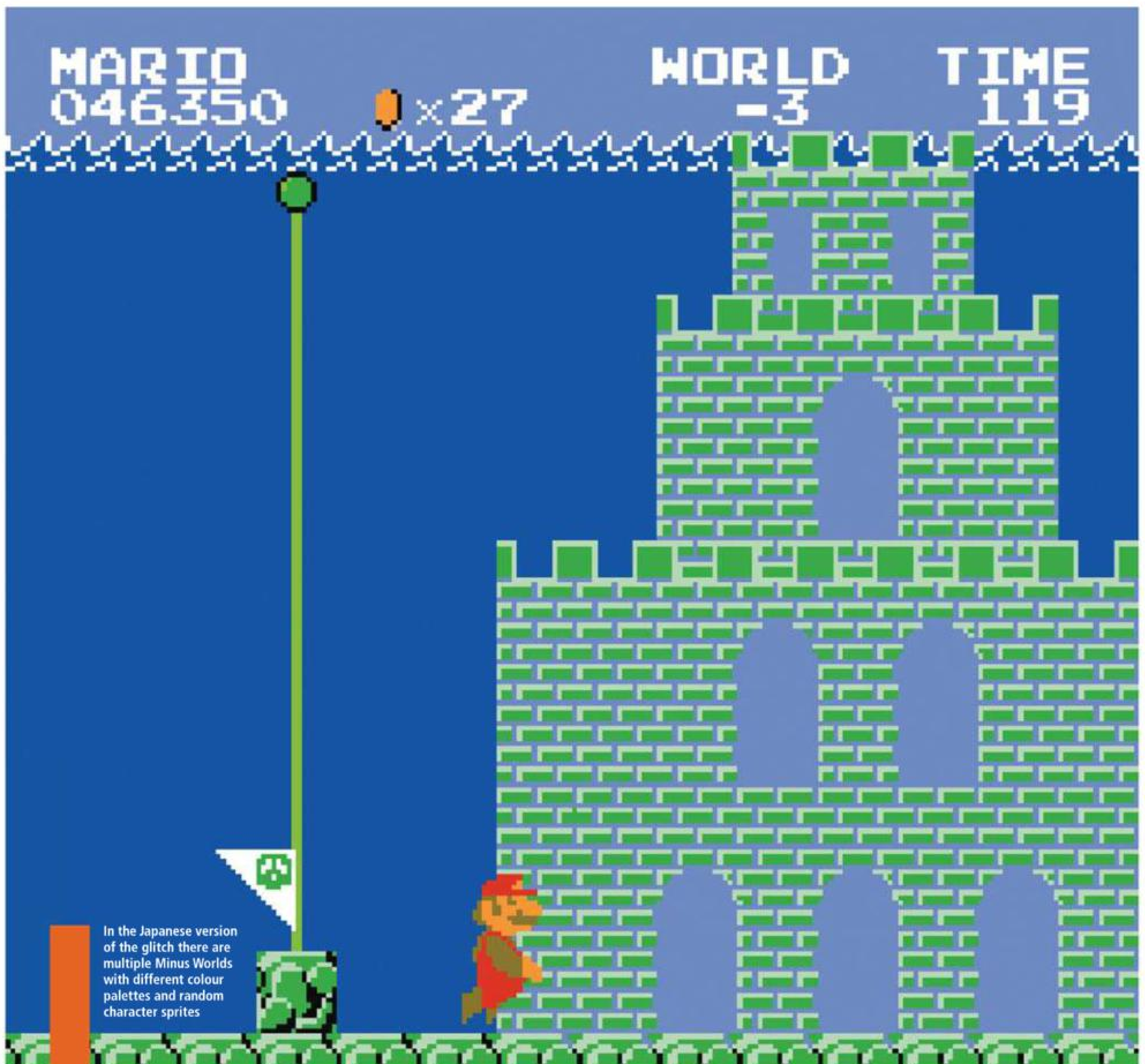
URL www.markvlong.me
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Places

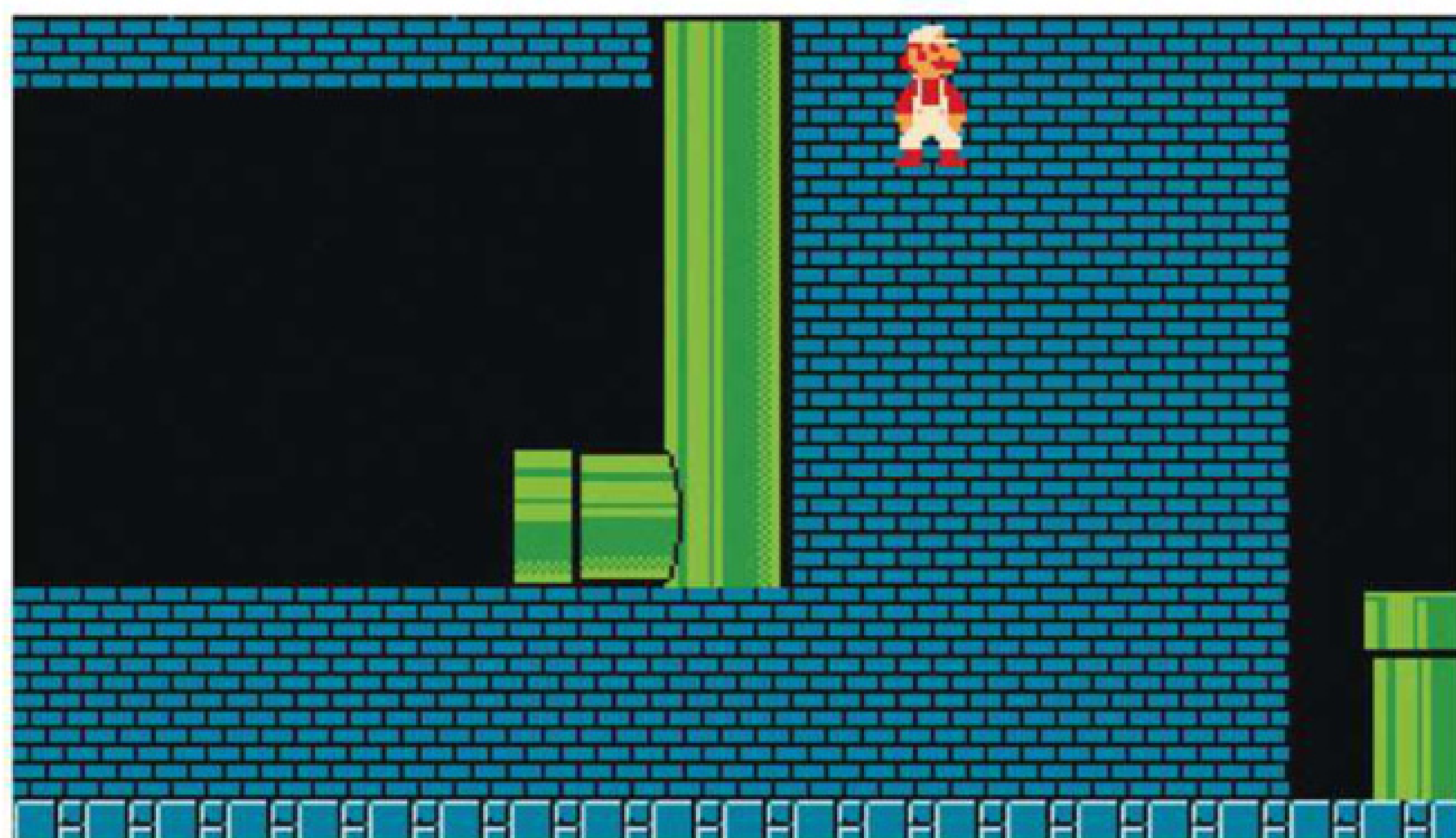
MINUS WORLD

The famous glitch level that helped games capture our imagination



In the Japanese version of the glitch there are multiple Minus Worlds with different colour palettes and random character sprites

From *Super Mario Bros*
Developer Nintendo
Origin Japan
Debut 1985



After Mario jumps into the brick wall of World 1-2, it's just a matter of sliding through the bricks to the Minus World warp pipe

Science has mostly usurped the supernatural in our collective consciousness, but the concept of magic is too old and too meaningful to just fade away. The inexplicable continues to slip through the chinks in reason, taking the form of ghostly presences, statistical flukes, and psychedelic experiences. But the kind of phenomena that are supernatural for us become mundane in the context of videogames, obedient to different but equally constant physical laws. If an ability to throw fireballs is encoded into your reality, it isn't really magic. Something has to leap outside of the ordinary or it's just a parlour trick. The real magic lies in glitches. These coding flaws turned out to be centrifuges for the dreams and desires of a generation of console gamers, and never with more lasting influence than the Minus World from *Super Mario Bros*.

You could make a good case for the Minus World's influence simply as a prototypical 'water level', but its greater impact was purely symbolic and contextual. It isn't like *Final Fantasy*'s Gold Saucer or *Mass Effect*'s Normandy, where you can just show it to someone and say "See?" Yet the only real difference between the Minus World and World 7-2 is the '-1' at the top, and 7-2 was already just 2-2 with more Bloopers. In the mid-'80s, however, when we were still internalising the new metaphysics of console games, that little number meant a lot. It was our first clear inkling that this new layer of reality we were exploring was imperfectly contrived and had its own hidden layers, that mystical realms lay beneath the rational surface. It also fuelled our unfounded convictions that other limits, a prerendered door or a far-off painted peak, might also be bypassed through some arcane manoeuvres.

It was our first clear inkling that this new layer of reality we were exploring was imperfect

The idea of the Minus World as a mystical space within an orderly cosmology is further strengthened by the way that Mario gains access to it, which accidentally taps into the magical concept that certain sequences of gestures and movements, performed in a place of power, can warp the fabric of reality. To access the pipes that lead to the Minus World, Mario has to find a certain brick wall at the end of World 1-2 that is both solid and permeable. In order to phase through the bricks, he has to leap while remaining in a crouch, a superhuman feat that recalls the physical exploits of the shamans in Carlos Castaneda's books. When he penetrates the wall without breaking it, anomalously coexisting in the same space, it quickly squeezes him out the other side, as though reality were eager to correct itself. But it's too late: Mario has crossed the divide into the irrational, never to return.

The Minus World captured imaginations because it was relatively easy to find, but it wasn't the first example of a coding oversight creating a mind-bending secret space in games. Its most legendary predecessor is the kill screen in the 256th level of *Pac-Man*, where half the maze breaks down into a semiotic nightmare of letters and numbers, as though Pac-Man had wandered into a postmodern novel – or into the disintegrating mind of someone who has played 256 consecutive levels of *Pac-Man*. Like the *Pac-Man* kill screen, the Minus World can only be escaped by dying, leaving you trapped in a hellish time loop that enhances the taboo thrill of infiltrating the messy innards below the game world's gleaming facade. Similarly, another *Mario* glitch, jumping over the flagpole, strands you alongside an infinite brick wall. The uneasy philosophical implications of such glitches seems likely to have planted the seed for contemporary digital artists such as Cory Arcangel, whose Super Mario Clouds piece eliminates all the game's graphics except a blue sky and white clouds scrolling endlessly.

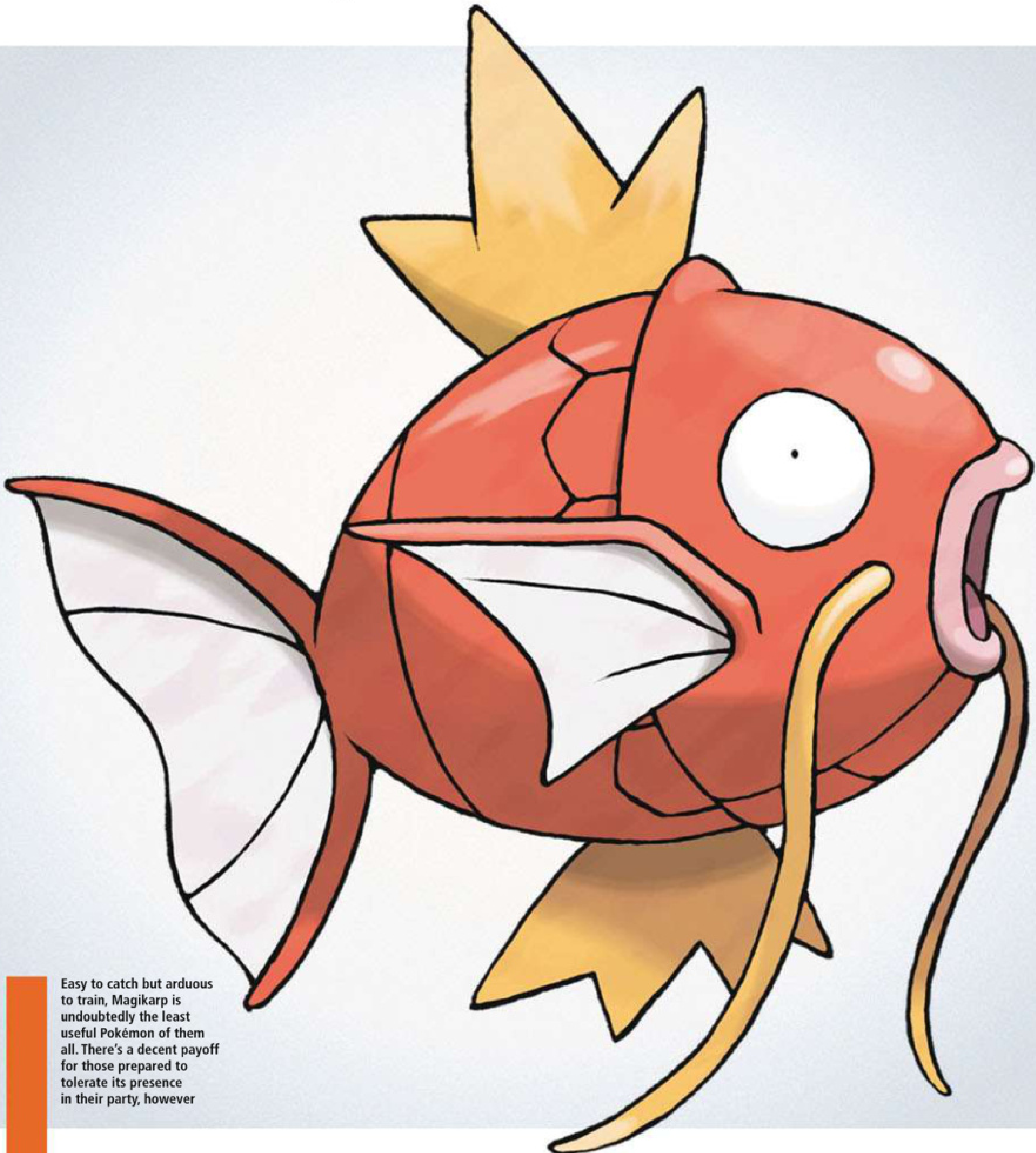
The glitch was quickly accommodated in the vocabulary of videogame design and culture. It probably helped popularise the deliberately created secret world, and it gave us the most volatile and exotic of all Pokémon, the MissingNo. You'd think such things would fade away – like magic into science – as technology improves, and perhaps they will. But human imagination and ambition are among the few things that evolve faster than technology, so for now compelling glitches still flourish in sprawling games such as the 3D *Fallout*s, where the rotating heads and chatty viscera are far more fantastical than all the giant bugs. Still, the most important legacy of the Minus World is the folklore it fuelled: the apocryphal levels and alternate outcomes that, because they can only be dreamed, are some of the most vivid places in gaming.

The implicit promise of the glitch is that you really can get *Pokémon*'s Mew out from under that delivery truck, find the Triforce in *Ocarina Of Time*, save Aeris in *Final Fantasy VII*, or make Lara Croft's clothes disappear. In-game red herrings and wishful thinking account for some of these myths, but it was the Minus World that first made us believe that anything was possible in videogames, and that no area was ever *truly* off limits. Before the Internet, these tall tales circulated like urban legends: the person who told you about the hidden volcano level had never actually played it, but his older brother's friend had. You didn't quite believe them, but nearly managed to out of sheer desire for there to be a little more terrain to uncover, a little more experience to be had beyond the finite quantity spread before you, if only you could do the right secret things in the right order. ■

Things

MAGIKARP

The most useless-seeming monster in the Pokéverse hides an awesome secret



Easy to catch but arduous to train, Magikarp is undoubtedly the least useful Pokémon of them all. There's a decent payoff for those prepared to tolerate its presence in their party, however

From *Pokémon* series
Developer Game Freak
Origin Japan
Debut 1996

Games often contain jokes, but it's rare for them to play one on their own audience. Magikarp, however, is a practical joke, a raspberry blown in the direction of the player. It's useless, stupid-looking and ubiquitous. Even more damning, it's boring. And worst of all, Magikarp is just a fish.

There's a sliding scale when it comes to Pokémon designs. Some are too ordinary, barely distinguishable from pets – creatures children didn't even need to switch on a handheld for. Then there are the designs that veer into extreme anime territory, such as the severe Mewtwo. But the most memorable pocket monsters are adorable blends of nature and fantasy – brightly coloured and charismatic, but also appearing as if, should you be really lucky, you might just catch one scampering out of a bush. Pikachu looks like a forest rodent crossed with a high voltage warning sign. But Magikarp? Magikarp is a fish.



The pointless Splash is all part of the Magikarp punchline, having no in-game effect. It has since passed on to other monsters

It couldn't be anything else with those big lips and dull eyes. And it's a near-omnipresent feature in the oceans surrounding *Pokémon*'s fictional take on Japan – cast your rod in the water and there's a good chance you'll heave a Magikarp back up.

Indeed, cast the first rod you receive in *Pokémon Red* and *Blue*, the Old Rod, into the water and you're guaranteed to dredge up a Magikarp. As if making one of its 151 monsters entirely useless wasn't enough of joke, Game Freak saw fit to double down and lumber players with this pointless piece of kit. The Old Rod and Magikarp are two of kind – there's little purpose to either, and you'll quickly want rid of both.

> Pikachu looks like a forest rodent crossed with a high voltage warning sign. Magikarp is a fish

Why is Magikarp so worthless? To start with, it only has one attack. Magikarp's signature move, Splash, is unique in the *Pokémon* canon for having no effect. It's worse than useless, in fact, because you're wasting a turn flailing at the enemy that could have been spent switching Magikarp for a monster who can land an attack. And this is what you must do if you want to level up a Magikarp: you deploy the floppy liability at the start of a battle to soak up a meagre helping of experience points before immediately switching it for another monster, who then has to absorb your opponent's first move. This is a standard technique for levelling newcomers to your party, but no other Pokémon stays so utterly defenceless for so long. After many battles playing out to this rhythm, Magikarp will reach level 15 and finally learn a new move: Tackle. Tackle is the utterly vanilla basic attack that your first Pokémon started with, and while it finally allows Magikarp to win a fight on its own, its appearance this late in the fish's lifecycle is yet another joke.

Magikarp isn't just a jape, however. It is a con, foisted upon gullible players in *Pokémon Red* and *Blue* by a shifty NPC. Talk to an old man in a Pokémon Centre early on and he'll lure you in with sales patter before offering a Magikarp for 500 dollars – small change by the end of the game, but a not inconsiderable sum early on. Is it a good deal? Game Freak doesn't seem to think so. "[You] paid an outrageous $500 for Magikarp!" the game exclaims.

But Magikarp has a secret. There's a hidden power behind that vacant stare, and only the most dedicated of trainers will unlock it. At level 20, Magikarp evolves. Or, more precisely, it transforms.

An evolved Pokémon usually bears some resemblance to its original form. The journey from cutesy starter monster Bulbasaur to the hulking Venusaur, for instance, is one that can marked by the slow bloom of the flower on its back. Not so with Magikarp and Gyarados. Magikarp might be a fish, but Gyarados is a magnificent serpent, a blue-gold leviathan ripped straight from Chinese legend. *Pokémon* connoisseurs can explain that its dual flying/water type status neuters certain weaknesses, that its total base stat of 540 is imposing, and how the beast is capable of learning a fearsome array of offensive moves. But its appeal is more straightforward: even on a 2.6-inch monochrome screen, this flying, dragon-like Pokémon is awesome to behold.

The journey of Magikarp is the ultimate RPG grind. Other games – and other Pokémon – reward investment incrementally, rationing out prizes like finely calibrated slot machines. But Magikarp is the unlikely mascot for delayed gratification, offering 20 levels of tedium before its jackpot. It's a reflection of the child-focused world of *Pokémon* that no critter could ever be a total waste of time, and that effort and investment are always acknowledged. And it's an evolutionary path inspired by folk tales of carp leaping over the mythical Dragon Gate and being transformed.

But there's another reason why Magikarp's tale resonates across such a broad cultural divide. The first *Pokémon*'s immediate sequels, *Gold* and *Silver*, offered players a shortcut to Gyarados, a one-shot chance to catch a special, red-hued version of the beast. But it felt like cheating. Gyarados is meant to be earned, and Magikarp's comedic existence is meant to be justified.

A clumsy, foolish-looking creature of the water, damned by comparisons to its more appealing peers. A long journey for acceptance. An unlikely transfiguration leading to an astonishing reveal. Parents who lament the time their children spend playing games instead of reading books can take comfort in this: those kids still have the story of The Ugly Duckling nestled in their pocket. ■

STUDIO PROFILE

Ubisoft Singapore

The developer behind Assassin's Creed III's naval sequences on working at the edges of technology and business models



1 Staff who worked on several *Prince Of Persia* titles joined Ubisoft Singapore in the early days, perhaps explaining the apparent ease with which it produced high-quality linear sequences for *Assassin's Creed*. 2 *Ghost Recon Online* features a wide range of authentic hardware. There's future technology, too, of course, but the military experience of some of Ubisoft's staff has undoubtedly contributed to its authenticity

The moment **Olivier de Rotalier** knew Ubisoft's Singapore operation was going to work out just fine came when the publisher's Montreal hub got in touch to discuss the levels that the fledgling studio had created for *Assassin's Creed II*. The senior team had asked the new branch to craft ten prototype missions, from which two or three were to be selected. So the phone call came as a pleasant surprise: Montreal wanted all ten.

"It was a key moment for this studio," the managing director explains. "And then we saw all the reviews and feedback after the game was released, and we realised those linear gameplay sequences were among the top features [of] *Assassin's Creed II*. We were very proud. When you build a team and you have your first success together, you feel much more confident about yourself, but also about the people working with you. We've done that together, we now have one star on our jacket and that [made us] very strong."

Formed in 2008, Ubisoft Singapore was born from the publisher's desire to take advantage of an exceptional talent pool within the region, but also to make use of the DigiPen Institute Of Technology, which was expanding from its Redmond home into a new campus in Singapore. The school, which offers Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Science courses in game design, is now affiliated with the publisher, and from the 61 candidates who've graduated, all have since found gainful employment in the industry – with over half now working at Ubisoft.

The benefits are obvious. DigiPen's students are taught the tenets of game design from industry experts such as faculty dean Prasanna Ghali, a former Nintendo employee and technical lead on the likes of *Wave Race: Blue Storm* and *1080° Avalanche*, while also learning about the process of making and shipping a game to deadlines. Each student is asked to build their own engine or to modify Valve's Source, which is the only licensed engine allowed on the course, and then to produce a completed game per semester.

"It's really the first step to becoming a developer," says **Hugues Ricour**, senior producer on the *Assassin's Creed* series. "They learn to understand the basics, and also participate in a cycle where they have to ship. That's also where you [first] face an audience and they criticise and go through your game, and experiencing that flow and having those interactions and that feedback is very critical."



There are 31 nationalities represented at Ubisoft Singapore, and De Rotalier (left) is hoping to expand to 300 staff

Though Ricour explains that "it's much [better] than having someone fresh out of school", he's also keen to point out why Ubisoft Singapore is the ideal habitat for these graduates to continue their education. "What they have learned is never enough. I mean, I'm still learning with almost 15 years of experience," he laughs. "I think what we offer here is a growing programme, because they have access to the Ubisoft technology, they have access to experienced people, and they very quickly have that cycle, because we ship every year."

"When you build a team and you have your first success together, you feel much more confident"

Partnering youth with experience, Ubisoft has brought over experienced developers from across its portfolio of studios. Staff from Montreal, Montpellier and Paris branches have all settled in at Singapore, while others have moved from east to west. It's a collaborative approach that has reaped dividends, yet it could create problems as well with a large, multistudio production like *Assassin's Creed III*. While Montreal is awake, Singapore sleeps, and vice versa. It's handy for bug fixes: one studio can report a problem and the other will have the issue resolved by morning, but the time difference must be difficult to manage?

Ricour optimistically sees it another way. "It's definitely not a problem – it's an opportunity. Of course, it triggers some [situations] as a manager that we need to respect, which is why we have a constant line of communication with Montreal, in particular with their creative director, Alex Hutchinson." Yet a little physical and professional distance has also helped the Singapore team. "Alex has been instrumental in giving us a clear vision, and a bubble that we could own in which we could really explore, innovate and deliver. Respecting that bubble, continuously communicating and asking for feedback allows us to collaborate and contribute immensely to the success of the game."



Founded 2008
Employees 230
Key staff Olivier de Rotalier (managing director), Hugues Ricour (senior producer), Adrian Blunt (producer), Emile Liang (producer)
URL www.bit.ly/XJldjw
Selected softography *Assassin's Creed Brotherhood*, *ACIII*,
Current projects *Ghost Recon Online*

Discussing the evolution of the studio from its first Ubisoft title, 2009 downloadable beat 'em up *Turtles in Time: Re-Shelled*, through to its seventh and most recent, *Assassin's Creed III*, de Rotalier suggests the journey has been all about "learning to innovate", a steady, gradual process for his team. Across four titles in the *Assassin's Creed* series, not to mention *Prince Of Persia: The Forgotten Sands*, the studio has honed its craft on linear gameplay sequences – introduced into the *Assassin's Creed* series to break the flow of its potentially overwhelming sandbox worlds. "The crowds can be claustrophobic," explains Ricour, "and this vast open world with pretty much a choice to go anywhere and do anything [needs to be] broken up by these linear missions. I think it's a good change of pace."

Yet when the time came to enter production for *Assassin's Creed III*, the studio had the confidence and the resources to bring something new, something daring, to the series. The missions to retrieve Captain Kidd's treasure may have been little more than a refinement of the linear sequences that had become the studio's hallmark, but the naval battles were something else entirely. Initially, there was concern at the studio that it wasn't the right fit for the series. An early prototype pulled the camera away from the action to a perspective reminiscent of *Sid Meier's Pirates!*, but that didn't feel right. "We wanted to capture the feeling of being there," says Ricour, "to continue that flow that you are in a thirdperson





***Ghost Recon Online* (above) smartly encourages co-operative play, not least with its perks that have greatest benefit when teams stay close. *Assassin's Creed III*'s naval sections (left) are a solo experience instead, with the emphasis on the drama of being onboard a ship of war**

adventure game and you are playing as Connor. Number two [on our list] was to create emotional moments. For example when you see a man of war, this huge ship that targets you and is going to ram your boat… that feeling can only happen if you're close to your crew at the wheel and see these gigantic ships charging at you."

The result, inspired by several field trips in a far smaller boat, as well as films like Peter Weir's Master And Commander and Wolfgang Petersen's The Perfect Storm, has been very warmly received. "I think at the moment we're still in a honeymoon phase," beams Ricour, "because we didn't really know what the reaction would be, it's so new and fresh, and a lot of people were questioning [it]. 'Is it still going to feel like *Assassin's Creed* or is it too far from the [core] game?' So far, the reactions we're seeing really welcome that new dimension."

Even so, Ricour and his team are keeping their feet firmly grounded. Pressed to discuss the idea of healthy competition between the Singapore and Montreal studios – with a eye to how the studio's offerings frequently seem to be among the most popular elements with critics and fans alike – Ricour insists: "We are very humble here in Singapore. Montreal is the mothership – they ship all the SKUs – and we would not know yet here how to build such a game from scratch, [nor] how to ship it on time on multiple consoles simultaneously."

Yet just across the studio, another team is busying itself with a triple-A title that is all its own work. The difference? It's free-to-play. Three years in the making, *Ghost Recon Online* is, at the time of writing, in open beta across North America and Europe, and a large team continues to prod it into shape behind doors that are rather fittingly unlocked by a fingerprint scanner, a piece of technology right at home in the Clancy series.

The game's producer, **Adrian Blunt**, explains why Singapore is the ideal place to develop a game like *GRO*: "I think historically we've benefited from being close to where [free-to-play gaming] started," he says. "Essentially, our dev team is made up of people who've been playing these games for a long time." It does no harm either that many of its employees have experience handling weaponry, owing to the country's policy on conscription. "Once a year, a staff member might leave for three weeks to go drive a tank," adds Blunt. "So we have plenty of people with hands-on army experience. A huge proportion of the development team knows how to fire a gun."

> "A staff member might leave to go drive a tank... A huge proportion of the team knows how to fire a gun"

Though Ubisoft Singapore is using eastern expertise to guide the game's continued development, *GRO* remains open only to western players. Indeed, there's no cross-continent functionality, with European gamers unable to battle with or against their US counterparts. "Basically, we've created two shards: one for North America and one for Europe," Blunt explains, "and it comes down to the number of players we can hold on those shards. It's one of those things we'll look to improve, but there's also the case that you don't want your servers to be too far geographically from your playerbase either."

It's an understandable decision, given Blunt's desire for the game to be fair. He believes that a skill-based title such as *GRO* wouldn't possess the same depth or accuracy if it was subjected to the whims of lag caused by distant servers. Yet it seems fairness is a word not always associated with free-to-play titles developed in Asia. "Particularly if you look at Korea, being able to pay to win is something that is accepted in the more traditional F2P markets. But it's not something that's accepted in the western market. And so we've had to adapt to that knowledge as well and make sure the game does actually fit the market we're going into. At the end of the day, the F2P market in the west is still relatively emerging, so we're still finding our feet from that perspective, but we have the basics, and it's now a case of adapting those basics to different regions."

It's pitched as 'Ubisoft's first triple-A F2P game', and though it's not quite up there with the most expensive retail titles in terms of visual quality, hands-on time with it suggests that description isn't too wide of the mark. It's been in open beta since August, with five patches released since then. As an ongoing concern, it represents a unique challenge for the studio, which has more experience playing free-to-play titles than developing them, yet the company's telemetry is allowing it to respond quickly to any issues that arise. Still, Blunt prefers to rely on feedback from people rather than simply check numbers. "It's important to engage the community," he says. "They're our shareholders."

As with *Assassin's* *Creed III*, the game's development has been a collaborative process and it's telling that Blunt should opt to talk up the game's social side as its most important element. "The USP is our focus on teamplay," he says. "It's the ability to feel like you're part of a team, regardless of whether you know the people you're playing with or against. It's the feeling that you know people are around you, and that what they're doing can support what you're doing." It's hard to tell whether he's referring to the game, or the company's ethos itself.

What's clear is that this cosmopolitan company is well positioned to move with the market. "We are growing and we have more and more options," muses de Rotalier. "We know that we can deliver very high quality content, as we've done with the naval battle and the linear gameplay sequences, and we know how to build a service.

"The industry is changing a lot at the moment and I think what we've built is a unique positioning that will allow us to go in different directions. What makes me very confident is that we have options. We have many options. We have built this freedom to choose our next battles and I'm confident we can execute them." ■

Q&A



Adrian Blunt
Ghost Recon Online producer

The business model for *Ghost Recon Online* is familiar to eastern developers, but how about the brand?
One of the benefits is that we've been building this game for a while. We've iterated a lot on it and so we've had the chance to really get used to what that *Ghost Recon* DNA is. And we've layered the game based on that. So we've brought people in who really understand that. I think it's one of the things Ubisoft does very well, with the way people move around within various studios, and that's helped us make sure we're true to the brand – that we're creating an experience that feels very *Ghost Recon*.

Do you tend to rely more on feedback from your most experienced players, or are you keen to tailor the game to newcomers, too?
That's an interesting question, because experienced players will be more vocal about intricacies within the game. A new player's going to have a broader statement: 'This is too difficult, I'm getting shot too much.' So, yes, it's important to listen to those skilled players, because they're giving us very valuable data, but we can't ignore the new user experience either. Someone new saying what they think about the game is hugely useful. Yes, we're a game that encourages skilled players, but the nature of the F2P model is that we need the game to be as accessible as possible.

When it came to competitive analysis, did you look more at other shooters or was your focus more on free-to-play titles?
It was a broad spectrum. We see shooters on any platform as interesting games that we should be looking at, regardless of business model. Be it *Call Of Duty*, be it *Battlefield*, be it any F2P shooter as well, we look at that as a holistic whole. From a business model perspective, obviously free-to-play games, regardless of their genre and platform, are interesting case studies. We don't limit ourselves to any necessary formula. I have guys playing Facebook games because that's an interesting take on F2P – we're not trying to be a Facebook game, but it's still interesting to see how they work. Call it a phenomenon, or a lasting [trend], it's interesting to look at.

At present, you're targeting the hardcore player – are you hoping to broaden your reach, or retain the existing playerbase and then get them to spend their money on items, perks and so on?
We haven't set ourselves a limit on the number of people we want to attract to the game. I mean, we're not trying to force it down a very competitive route – if the community wants us to go down that route, and it feels viable, then sure we can look at it. But we need to stay open to attracting a whole new range of players just by nature of the accessibility. This game is free, it's high quality, it's going to attract players who may never have played a shooter before, and this could be their first shooter experience on PC. So that's an interesting market to look at, and we're never going to close the door on that.





Blunt's team contains graduates from DigiPen: "Regardless of their discipline, as graduates straight out of school, there's some exceptional talent"

THE MAKING OF…

Velocity

The tumultuous journey of one small developer, and one Mini that would go on to be a huge success



Velocity's clever, but it's also often a pretty game, the lavish artwork of the menus and brief interludes meshing well with the intricate pixel art of the stages themselves

Format PSP, Vita, PS3
Publisher FuturLab
Developer In-house
Origin UK
Release 2012

Play *Velocity* and you're piecing together a story, a hectic tale of calamities, hard-won lessons and last-minute rescues. FuturLab's 2D shooter takes an old template and makes it new, throwing in a teleportation mechanic that allows you to blink through laser fire or zip past any and all barriers. It's a clear and uncluttered design and it provides a brisk reworking of a much-loved genre.

The confidence on display suggests a game with a painless birth. In truth, though, nothing about this PlayStation Mini was painless. The story of *Velocity* – and of FuturLab itself – is another hectic tale of the calamities, hard-won lessons and last-minute rescues faced by a small ship buffeted by happenstance in the vacuum of space.

FuturLab didn't start out making games. In fact, the studio was formed by accident. Owner and director **James Marsden** had been part of another startup making commercial Flash projects, which spent a year building up a small client base. Then his boss went on holiday to Russia. "[He] met a girl out there that he fell in love with," Marsden explains. "He decided he was going to emigrate. He came back for about five minutes to say he was taking the company to Russia. I was left with the opportunity to either get another job or take all the clients we'd built up to start another company."

And so he did, doing as much Flash work as he could for those clients. "Then, about three years later, I got a kick up the arse." The kick came from Jade Tidy, a FuturLab producer who has since left to work at Relentless. "She took me aside and said, 'Look, this company's going nowhere,'" Marsden laughs. "She said I needed to do what I started out to do, which was games."

"The game got canned, of course. It was the first time it had happened to us. I had to sack everyone"

Over a Christmas period, he devoured tutorials on how to make games, read papers from universities around the world and anything else he could find on game technology, and put together something that, at the time, had never really been done before: a really fast scrolling engine for Flash. Well, it was cutting edge for 2004. "Back then, Flash games didn't have fast-scrolling environments like *Sonic The Hedgehog*. That got the attention of the BBC, and we started making games for them."

Young and ambitious, Marsden also used the engine to pitch to Sony. "We didn't have any experience in game development, so pitching to PlayStation, we realised we'd have to do something a bit out there to stick in the memory.



Kirsty Rigden built *Velocity*'s prototype stages – 12 levels that introduced the mechanics now spread across 50

We did this crazy roleplay to pitch an ARG [alternate reality game] that was anchored to the PS3 – real-world actors, text messages, that sort of thing. We devised an in-office game to play with the Sony people. We looked on LinkedIn to find the biographies of the people we were going to pitch to, and we took those testimonials and work history, and incorporated that into our narrative."

The approach impressed Sony, and although the publisher swiftly decided the project in question wasn't quite right, it wanted to work with FuturLab. Within weeks, it offered the studio work on an ARG to publicise the launch of *Heavy Rain*. Marsden signed a two-year deal, and the project gave FuturLab the confidence to take a longterm lease on a large two-storey office suite on the outskirts of Hove and to form a new company, FuturLab Meta, with the directors of Relentless.

"Nine months in, the game got canned, of course. These things happen, but it was the first time it had happened to us. I had to sack everyone. Five people."

Relentless was impressed with the way Marsden had dealt with Sony, however, and invited him to pitch a game it would publish on the PlayStation Network. Mere days later, FuturLab was making a music game for PSP. It was a skeleton crew approach, just Marsden and Robin Jubber, a programmer he'd met while looking into XBLIG development. Once again, the future looked bright – a state of affairs that was to last about five months this time.

"Then Minis were announced," laughs Marsden, "and Relentless had a change of perspective. Overnight, what you get for a fiver on the PlayStation Store had just changed. They thought, 'Now there are Minis, we're not going to be able to charge what we thought we could charge for this game.' So they canned it."

An asset FuturLab did have, however, was an engine for PSP. "Robin said, 'OK, we've got the tech. Let's just make a game and get it out there.' We didn't have any money, because it had all been spent on a big telly." Marsden and Jubber focused their attention on *Coconut Dodge*, an old action game Flash prototype that saw players controlling a crab and racing back and forth across a 2D screen to avoid falling coconuts.

While Jubber readied the game for Minis, Marsden tried to drum up more corporate Flash work. In his spare time, though, he also renewed his interest in music production, immediately picking up on a song he'd written while at university. "I'd always wanted to see it realised properly," he remembers. "I'd go back to it every two years, and could never get it to sound good. One Christmas, while we were working on the Mini, I started to make this track properly. The way I made it sound right was to make it sound like an old-school shoot 'em up soundtrack."

And as luck would have it, at the same time Jubber was clamouring to make a space shooter that took advantage of the technology behind *Coconut Dodge*, which was all about enabling fast movements on a 2D screen. "He said, 'We've got code we can re-use, and we should do that. I can knock that out in a weekend.' That was the birth of *Velocity*."

***Velocity* inherited more** than just code. "With *Coconut Dodge* completed, it was clear that the maze-mastering stuff was what was great about it," says Marsden. "Short levels in which you're really challenged for a short space of time – that was a hit. We thought: 'Let's reuse the mechanics as well. So the way that you hold a button to go fast in *Coconut Dodge*, let's change that to instead of going fast, you just appear somewhere else on the screen when you let go.' That was the teleportation mechanic for *Velocity*. It was as simple as that."

A simple idea, but transformative. By allowing players to warp their ship around a series of scrolling mazes, FuturLab had brought a sense of dynamism back to the space shooter, breaking up the racing line of games such as *Xenon 2* to allow for a scenario in which you moved in hops, diving in and out of conflict, and picking a complex path through the world. Teleportation would allow the player to control everything, from the initial approach taken with enemy encounters to the manner in which they hunted for collectibles, while a squeeze of a trigger would let them speed up the rate at which the environments scrolled past. A straightforward addition to the shoot 'em up arsenal had opened out the action completely,

in other words, and the design felt both warmly traditional and thrillingly new.

A procession of commercial work allowed Marsden to hire **Kirsty Rigden**, a producer from Relentless, as well as John Steels, an artist who would provide the game's visual approach. "The look of the game was to be kind of a modern manga look," says Marsden. "I didn't want to go pixel art, as we eventually did. I wanted traditional, old-school gameplay, but brought up into a modern look with these modern mechanics. That's the same thing we wanted for the music: retro chiptune, but with modern production and all the rest of it.

"Unfortunately, it didn't go that way. John spent about half a day trying to get that style to work and just decided it wasn't going anywhere. He did pixel art instead, and the level of detail he put into it was really impressive."

Steels worked on the project for about eight weeks until he had to "get a proper job", as Marsden puts it. Meanwhile, a prototype was coming together, with 12 levels that showed off all FuturLab's core ideas for the game. "To be fair, those first 12 levels, they were no good," admits Rigden. "We'd just crammed everything in. All of the mechanics were introduced within a handful of stages. We had a big barbecue and we invited everyone around to focus test it. We realised they liked it, but they couldn't get to grips with it. There was too much going on at once."

Running low on money again, but with a promising – if problematic – prototype, FuturLab approached Sony for a PlayStation Plus deal. "We got it, but it's complicated," says Marsden. "Basically, you get a big chunk of cash by going with PlayStation Plus, but you only get it when the game's finished. We still had to find the money to finish it."

At the time, Brighton's game developers had started having monthly social drinks. 2011 was a difficult year for a town that had once been a hub for major development in the UK. Black Rock Studios had recently closed, and former big-team development staff were now trying to make a living as indies. Some of them were still feeling generous, however, and one of them – Marsden's cagey on who precisely – liked his ideas enough to give him a bridging loan to finish the game.

The loan allowed FuturLab to hire another level designer and it also provided three months of uninterrupted work on *Velocity*. "That was the period when we made it," says Rigden. "It had the assets in it before then, but that's when we made the actual game."

Q&A



Joris De Man
Composer

How did you get involved with *Velocity*?
I met FuturLab via work with Relentless. The deeper connection was that I'd done *N+*'s music, and my background, when I started out, wasn't doing the kind of orchestral *Killzone* stuff anyway. It was doing Atari chiptune music. I'd not done any of it for years and it was nice to be approached by James to go back and do the thing I'd started on *N+* and take it to the final degree. I think James undersells himself a little bit in terms of his contribution – the basis for the music was really solid. It was just a case of adding some themes and letting it all bleed together a little.

Was his music your main entry point?
Overall, I was inspired by the game as much as the music that was already written. That teleportation mechanic was something I didn't feel I had really seen before. It really gives the game something else. Certain games you pick up, you just know it's got something going on, something worth playing around with.

How did you go about adding your own elements to the music?
Normally [on projects] you get given files over time. James just handed over his laptop with all his music on it, and I could just sift through it all and find out what I liked, what worked, and what I wanted to really focus in on and evolve.

"It was there right from the start, but that's when the game really came together," agrees Marsden. "Levels were being constructed and our new designer, Jack Lang, was able to work out the alien path editor system that Robin had implemented and which nobody else could get their head around." The scrolling shooter finally had something to shoot.

Velocity was seeing fresh mechanics implemented in almost every other level: bombs to fire, allies to rescue, glass structures that could be shattered to open new routes. One of the last of these ideas would really alter the game. Short-range teleportation had sped up the basic shooter pace and provided new kinds of routes through each stage. Long-range teleportation, which hinged on the ability to drop respawn points throughout a stage, turned *Velocity* into a sort of puzzle game – now you could go back through levels to explore multiple paths and get involved in numerous locked-door challenges.

"The idea of being able to go back through the same level and take a different route very quickly seemed like a good idea," says Marsden. "It's not rewinding time, it's rewinding space. It's taking that maze-mastering element, and just pushing it as far as it could go. The game calls out for it, really. You should be able to drop telepods and go different places. That's how it works in *Flashback*. It was a perfect storm."

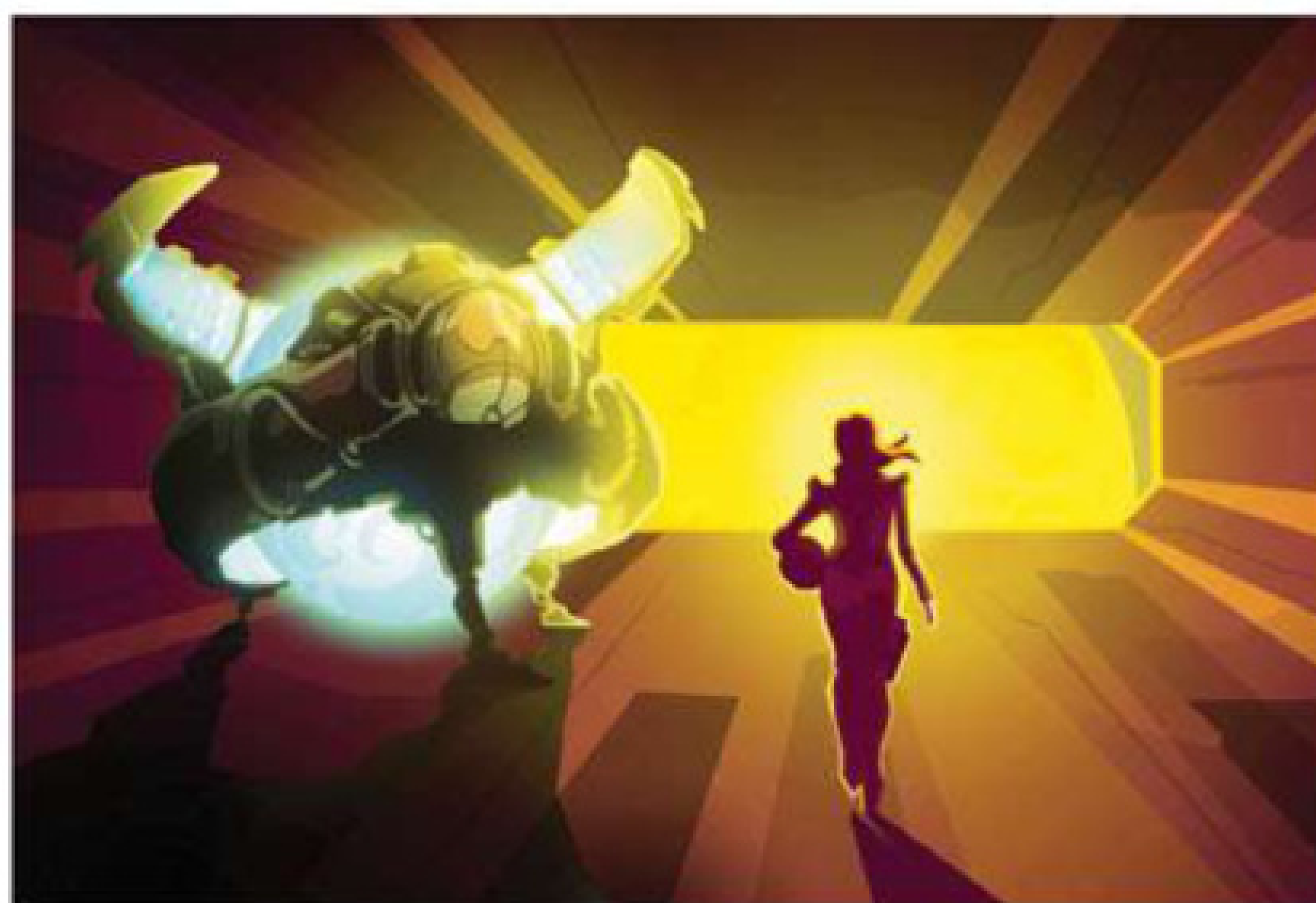
The end result, according to Marsden, who doesn't hold back his pride, "felt like the best game on the platform. The best Mini." For all its ideas, however, *Velocity* could have been an exercise in empty cleverness. Teleporting makes the design interesting, perhaps, but it's the controls that make it joyful. It's the elastic feeling as you stretch a cursor across the screen to pull off a jump, the manner in which you fling bombs away from your vessel, and the explosions of glass and steel as you blast a path through the levels.

"Ultimately, that's down to getting as many variables as possible and tweaking them and tweaking them," says Marsden. "I was tweaking the controls before we started even making the game. While Robin was prototyping the mechanics, I was just saying we needed to try it this way or that way. He must have re-coded the short-form teleport ten times, because it just wasn't feeling right.

"By the time we came to make the game, we had these rules that we basically wrote down. We knew how wide teleport gaps should be, how many tiles you could have on either side while going sideways. That time was invaluable. This stop-start development and all these disasters weren't an ideal way to make a game, but they had their perks."

Perks indeed: the protracted development resulted in a game that's struck a chord with audiences, allowing FuturLab to teleport its own way up the food chain, with several new projects in progress and a strong presence on the PlayStation Mobile platform. "It's been a massive boost for our profile," says Marsden. "People know who we are now. People at Sony are now using *Velocity* as an example for other developers, too, which feels very good."

Beyond all that, *Velocity* provided Vita and PSP owners with an uncommonly punchy Mini to thoroughly lose themselves in for hours on end, one that uses the handhelds' wide screen to draw you right through its pixellated universe. Give in. Load it up, jam on the headphones and squeeze the trigger. Pick an empty spot on the horizon and teleport into the distance. Blink and you're gone. Goodbye. ■





The original art style was a kind of modern manga, with classic shapes and colours updated to get the most out of the PSP screen. In the end, pixel art seemed a better fit for the levels themselves



To drum up interest in a PlayStation Mini, FuturLab used a canny mixture of stickers and bright cupcakes



Hot desking

Delve through *Velocity*'s menus and you'll find some strange treats, such as a futuristic desktop complete with a calculator and a copy of *Minesweeper*. Many of these elements came directly from Robin Jubber. "Basically, I'm coding from home," he says. "I'm coding on a desk I've built out of a massive piece of wood I found in a skip. I'm coding in a gap beneath the stairs. Working like that makes you want to do all the stuff you used to do with those old games. So I built an OS for the ship's computer. It has to have a calculator, right? And *Minesweeper*. And then a whole bunch of other crap just falls in, too. I used to work for this really big company and everything's prescribed. Someone tells you what you're working on, you do it for five hours, go home and don't think about it for the rest of the day. When you work on something from home, something you care about, you put your heart and soul into it." He laughs. "I did quite a lot of it drunk, too."




A happy-looking *Velocity* team. Pictured from left: Joris De Man, Kirsty Rigden, James Marsden, Robin Jubber and Jack Lang

CREATE
GALLERY

THE ART OF...

Spec Ops: The Line

How Yager found its Heart Of Darkness in Dubai



This article's images appear courtesy of game art site Dead End Thrills (www.deadendthrills.com)

Spec Ops: The Line spends its art budget on things other games don't. Visible character progression – or rather degeneration – is one, as experienced by Martin Walker and his squad. As Walker loses touch with his humanity and reality, his complexion and gait become increasingly monstrous

Q&A



Mathias Wiese
Art director



Jason Flanagan
Art lead

Spec Ops: The Line gives a beautifully gauged Chinese burn to a genre that deserves more than just a slap on the wrist. From the moment Delta Force captain Martin Walker exits a biblical sandstorm into an apocalyptic Dubai, it just never stops twisting. Offered none of the usual immunity from the human cost of war, Walker and his squad must instead follow the path of Marlow in Joseph Conrad's Heart Of Darkness, exposing themselves to the savagery upon which so much civilisation is built. Many lines are crossed by both characters and the game: psychological, technological, physical and moral. For the artists at German developer Yager, the challenge was to build a world that could push a soldier over these lines, as art director **Mathias Wiese** and art lead **Jason Flanagan** explain.

How did you superimpose the Vietnam aesthetic on a location as futuristic as Dubai?
Mathias Wiese Certainly we took inspiration from films like Apocalypse Now and Full Metal Jacket, and it's mainly the journey character of them. You're forced to travel dangerous lands, and there's the psychedelic aspect of how stress and violence influence people.
Jason Flanagan Also the imagery, especially in the first part of the game – the helicopter sequence specifically – feels very Vietnam-ish. You can just imagine flying over rice fields rather than skyscrapers. But that's something that just naturally happens when you have helicopters; you just strike that vein automatically.

Walker and his squad are visibly ruined by their journey. Was that expensive artistically?
JF A lot of [those] you'd interface with were refugees or looters or [rogue US unit The Damned] 33rd, so that left us with more room to focus on the main three characters. But it was expensive. We had a lot of talks with producers [about] why 'this doesn't make sense'.
MW It was a lot of fun for our character artists, having the chance to transform a character and use up to four different, fully rigged character models. The characters don't sleep for two-and-a-half days, I think, and when that happens you start to see things. They've been buried in sand, shot at – they should look different, barely even like people in the end.

The white phosphorous sequence must have taken some discussion.
MW We had a lot of back and forth with 2K, but that was more to find out whether the player should have the chance to *not* do it. That was the question the whole time, and of course it would have changed the whole game; it would

Radioman owes a lot to Dennis Hopper's manic disciple of Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando) in Apocalypse Now. His penthouse is one of the best-decorated interiors in recent gaming memory





have made no sense to continue. And the degree of violence and how shocking it could be was also a big discussion. The scene with the mother and the child… How old can the child be? How gruesome should it be? How gruesome does it *need* to be? It's a really, really bad thing, and to think that it happens in the real world is just terrible. But people serving in those countries constantly get to see it.

JF We iterated heavily to get it right. The traversal to get to that point… Was it enough? Were there too many people? How scorched does it need to be versus the actual trench that you've mistakenly bombed? But, yeah, also in terms of the artwork that was done there, how close to reality or real references does it have to be? That was quite a tough juggle to make it, y'know, possible to put on the disc.

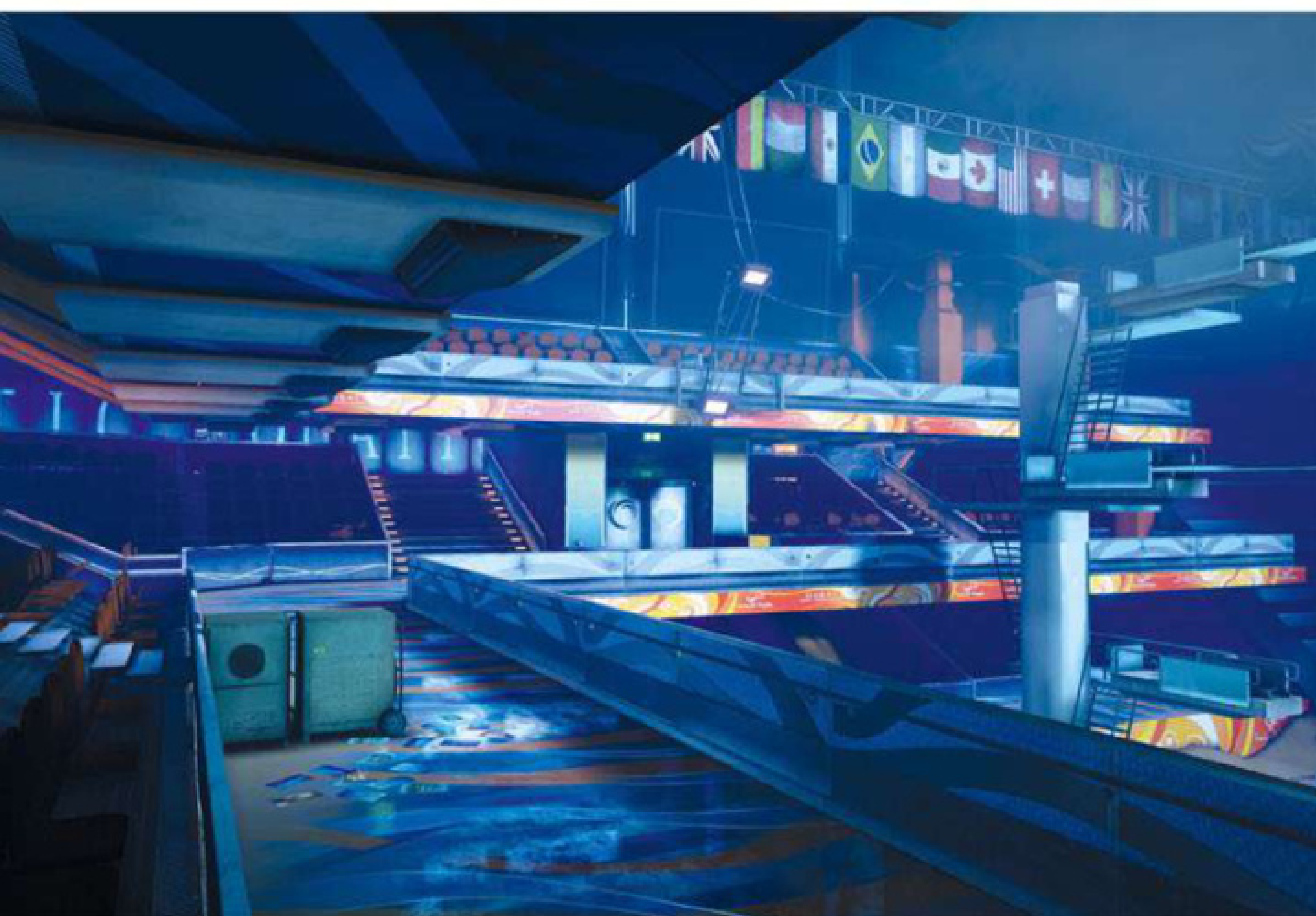
MW It does have a depressing effect on people and it did for us, searching through all these reference materials and just having to deal with the topic. We really needed something that has the potential to make [Walker] crack. What do you have to do to a soldier who's constantly shooting people to make him lose his mind?

How hard was it to pull off such violent sandstorms within the levels themselves?

JF Fortunately – and unfortunately – I sat next to the lead effects artist for a while and, yeah, it was quite a handful. We had to re-tool a lot of the post-processing that we used, and had to build a lot of our own technology to be able to have those possibilities, to have the sandstorm raging inside the level, [and] visible outside from an interior, and have a stable framerate. We had different technologies for different types of situation. The technology on the road level – where it comes down and smashes through the cityscape, vaulting debris at you – was a different setup than the interior sandstorm fights.

The game makes exceptional use of natural versus artificial light.

JF We shot a lot of reference in Dubai, and that was really striking: just how amazing the lighting is in a desert environment. And the city, how the skyscrapers react to the lighting, how they sparkle, and the different types of materials there. That was a major component for trying to break away from the standard Unreal Editor look. We made an effort to focus on refugees having possibilities for lighting with generators, and Konrad's 33rd still having portable units and big floodlights. You could really tell there was a different kind of presence to that area. ■



What Games Are



TADHG KELLY

The importance of staying relevant

There's an Anthony Burgess line that has stuck with me over the years: "And death, terrible as prunes". It's by a writer who has grown up in fear of the fruit (I don't recall why), so much so that to him prunes are a dark symbol. The gag, of course, is that they're just silly little purple things you eat. The subjective perception and the objective reality are different.

Lately, I have been feeling something similar about games: that both industry and academy are full of symbols that seem like part of a Very Important Conversation, but to which the outside world doesn't relate, or finds vaguely ridiculous.

Take *CLOP*. A sequel to *QWOP*, you play it by using four keys to control each leg of a horse and try to make it gallop across a level. It's almost impossible to go farther than a few metres because of the unforgiving physics, and the end results are often wickedly hilarious.

On face value, *CLOP* is a memorable thing that you play with for a laugh. But for those who are part of a certain active Twitter scene, *CLOP* is a Significant Game. It's a part of a conversation about the nature of play, the sort of thing you see at Mudlark's Playful event in London, and to that sort of crowd its meanings are layered.

It's a similar story with many fringe/indie games. Anna Anthropy's *Keep Me Occupied* is an arcade cabinet developed in support of the Occupy movement. Players dragged the cabinet around the streets of Oakland, playing the game as part of the act of protest. This makes it perfect for the Experimental Gameplay sessions at GDC, where it could be considered as avant-garde. Beyond those walls though? Really?

You could say the same for many titles, such as *The Binding Of Isaac* or *Proteus*. Their acceptance is wrapped up in a scene, and they are key examples that prove that games are an art form. All arts have similar scenes, subcultures and genres, which have internal cultures and frames of reference. My worry, however, is that our scene is so introverted that it has no discernible effect on the outside world.

What leads me to think this? Well consider how the console industry's dedication to franchises is now so deep that you maybe see three new ones per year. All the rest are overly familiar



The scene's response to this shift has been poor. Many adopt a rejectionist position, assuming the storm will pass

material that, in some cases, we've been playing for decades. Consider also how over-interpreted those releases are in terms of significance.

Even in **E**247, the cover and editorial focused on a narrative of lineage and improved excellence over the decades. Using the *Metal Gear* series as a lodestone example, the story of a dedicated project slowly coming to life over many generations is unmistakable. In many ways that's just as prune-juicy as the indie conversation – a level of meaning implied by a certain group of people (journalists) is absent for most others. The difference is it's conservative rather than radical.

So what? Games sell by the million and people play and love them. Who cares if they're reading more into them than is actually there? What does it matter if the culture and its meanings are oblique to outsiders?

These are hard questions to argue against. Some will find significance in *Revengeance*, just as some find significance in Orson Welles films and what they mean to cinema. The only question is whether that cultural cachet is viable enough to sustain and grow. That's why I'm worried.

Certain platforms and modes of game are in decline, and almost all of them are favoured by the scene (whether radical or conservative). Handheld consoles are ceding their entire reason to exist to the mobile phone. PCs are radically changing with Windows 8 on the one hand and iPads on the other. Mid-level publishers are finding the road to profit to be ever more tortuous. No one wants to fund a retail game any more, which means the future is very likely all about free-to-play.

And those 'lamestreamers' who don't get the scene? They're funding the revolution. The industry in general is growing, but on iPad with *CSR Racing*, not on Xbox Live. These games have a much broader conversation with their players that largely ignores scenes. In their world, *CLOP* is a poor game because it doesn't monetise well.

The scene's response to this shift has been poor. Many adopt a rejectionist position, assuming that the storm will pass. So at a time when touch interactions and mobile content are game changers, the indie scene seems to spend most of its time making weird EXE's that only work on PC. Meanwhile, the more conservative side continues to just mine existing veins of IP to death.

The problem with scenes is that their introverted talk can become permanent. They get locked in circular feuds that ignore the outside world. The scenes lose relevance, and so those who make the purchasing decisions (players) or funding decisions (publishers) that drive the industry forward just sidestep the whole thing.

There's no point saying outsiders are not smart enough to understand – that leads to a declining audience and a scene that can't innovate. If we're going to position ourselves as forward-looking leaders, we need to work to ensure that we stay relevant. Because nobody really cares for prunes.

Tadhg Kelly has worked in games, from tabletop to consoles, for nearly 20 years. Visit him at www.whatgamesare.com

In The Click Of It



CLINT HOCKING

The FPS waveform

Over the past several years, I've spent much of my professional life working on firstperson shooters in different capacities, and have spent a good deal of my gaming time playing them. In striving to better understand the FPS, I have tried to develop some formal tools to allow me and the teams I work with to discuss and compare different aspects of various shooters. One of the tools I've used in the past is a lens for examining the experiential curve – or waveform – of an FPS.

Abstractly, we can consider that any FPS – *Doom, Dishonored, Far Cry 2, Fallout 3, COD: Black Ops* – exhibits a characteristic waveform. In these waveforms, the peaks and troughs of amplitude define the highest and lowest limits of the intensity of the play experience, and the wavelength defines the frequency with which the experience alternates between those peaks over time. We can also consider that each waveform has a characteristic baseline, which may be higher or lower than others; high-baseline FPSes are on average more intense than low ones.

I define peak amplitude as when the player is required to make many critical decisions rapidly; when a large percentage of these decisions are pushed on the player (for instance, they're reactive decisions she is forced to make); and when an increasing number of the decisions are made at the lowest (closest to input) level of gameplay.

An example of a peak amplitude experience would be when the player needs to manage reloading a half-empty weapon while turning off her night vision, needing to abort a dash to cover because a grenade has just landed there, and deciding whether to aim down her sights or fire from the hip on the enemy that's just entered the room beside her. Negative peak amplitude is when the player has lots of time and no pressure to pull any of several noncritical decisions into play, often from the higher levels of gameplay.

An example of this experience would be when the player wonders whether she should head towards town to sell some scavenged loot for shotgun ammo, and then perhaps take another mission that would increase her standing with one faction or another, or whether she should instead look for a cave entrance she's heard is nearby.



Raising the baseline in a low-amplitude, high-frequency FPS makes it exhilarating, but risks becoming overwhelming

Doom has a characteristic waveform with a moderate amplitude and a moderate frequency. In fact, *Doom*'s waveform is sine-like enough that we could use it as a standard for comparison. Peak amplitude in *Doom* was when you would retreat from an area because you were low on ammo only to trigger a trap that would turn out the lights, open a bunch of hidden walls, and force you to engage a dangerous wave of many different types of monsters while trying to get the most out of your diminishing health and ammo supply. Negative peak amplitude came when you had cleared a large section of a level and were looping back looking for secret areas and gathering all the remaining pick-ups so you could go into the next section or level fully equipped.

A *Doom* level might take about 15-20 minutes to complete, and you might go from peak to peak two or three times, giving it a frequency of about seven minutes. Numbers for a playthrough vary tremendously, of course. The point is not to argue specific numbers but to try to abstract entire games so they can be compared to similar games.

Over the decade or so after *Doom*, developers experimented with ways to modulate the FPS waveform. The arena shooters of the late '90s, such as *Quake III*, had lower amplitudes and higher frequencies (shorter wavelengths). The immersive sims of the same era, as exemplified by *Deus Ex*, gave us the opposite: higher amplitude experiences with lower frequencies.

More recently, the FPS has undergone a transformation. Developers have experimented with techniques to raise the baseline: deathstreaks and perks unlocked for time spent are examples of designs that increase the intensity at peak negative amplitude, raising the overall baseline. Raising the baseline in a low-amplitude, high-frequency FPS makes for an exhilarating experience, but this 'compression towards noise' approach risks making the experience overwhelming, even exhausting. To combat this, designers have invented level-transforming killstreak rewards that begin to describe a kind of synthetic waveform.

A triggered killstreak reward acts as a kind of vertical bar that slashes through the waveform, and synthesises high-amplitude peaks in the experience (or troughs for those sent to respawn by your AC-130 bombardment). As more players gain access to them over the course of the match, a new synthetic frequency that increases over time becomes the defining frequency of the match.

The birth (and rapid iteration) of the synthetic waveform may be the force that ultimately allows the FPS to branch into its many subgenres. This will hopefully allow more classic competitive shooters and immersive sims to exist alongside their teenaged offspring by staying true to their proven waveforms, without feeling the need to compete directly by incorporating the synthesising features that overpower their form. At least until the classic FPS comes to its mid-life crisis.

Clint Hocking lives in Seattle and works at Valve. He blogs at www.clicknothing.com

The Possibility Space

RANDY SMITH

Discouraging discovery

You may already know that I host an MP3 blog, a hobby born of my obsessive need to listen to recently emerging music. Maintaining GeminiRadio.net requires tracking the source of music to the artists and labels that release it, or at least to other bloggers who found it first. In the past, this involved a grey market of MP3s that some blogger acquired somehow and is now sharing with the Internet. This is not to be confused with sites whose function is to bypass the market for music. These are hand-curated collections by fans who will only be happier if they convince you to support the artists.

But there's been a very recent change, due to streaming services such as Soundcloud and Bandcamp. Namely, the sundry sources of music are using streaming services almost exclusively, because it affords them better control. You can listen for free as often as you'd like, but if you want the track on your hard drive, you must pay. This makes my life difficult. Previously, if a song was too challenging to acquire then I'd give up on it, but today I'd miss out on a lot of good music. When desperate, I employ a technical, expert-user workaround to acquire the song against the distributor's intentions.

At this point, I hope you're wondering what kind of hypocritical monster I am. If I want to pay my rent and not eat dog food, I count on people deciding to give me a couple bucks for the digital goods I produce, yet here I am performing acrobatics to steal the goods of others. In my defence, I'll submit that I spend many hundreds of dollars every year on digital music. Back when Napster, Soulseek, and so on were peer-to-peer things, as a rule if a downloaded album sat on my hard drive for a couple months, I forced myself to either delete or buy it, depending on whether I cared enough to ever listen to it again. I don't claim this is morally unambiguous, but when it came to personal consumption, I stole music temporarily to make better-informed decisions about which artists I most wanted to support.

But for blogging research, I want something very different. I want giant playlists of songs I'm not certain about, from a variety of sources, that I'll listen to for some time to evaluate. The only sensible way to accomplish that today is to



Tiger Style also distributes over the Internet in a market flooded with cheap content, a relatively new phenomenon

download MP3s. There used to be a culture of giving away free sample tracks to promote bands, and my hard drive is stuffed with preview singles I wasn't asked to pay for. This phenomenon is what the new streaming trend has nixed. From a musical distributor's point of view, it makes perfect sense. If you're a casual user who just wants a free preview, then stream; expert users with special needs will find another way.

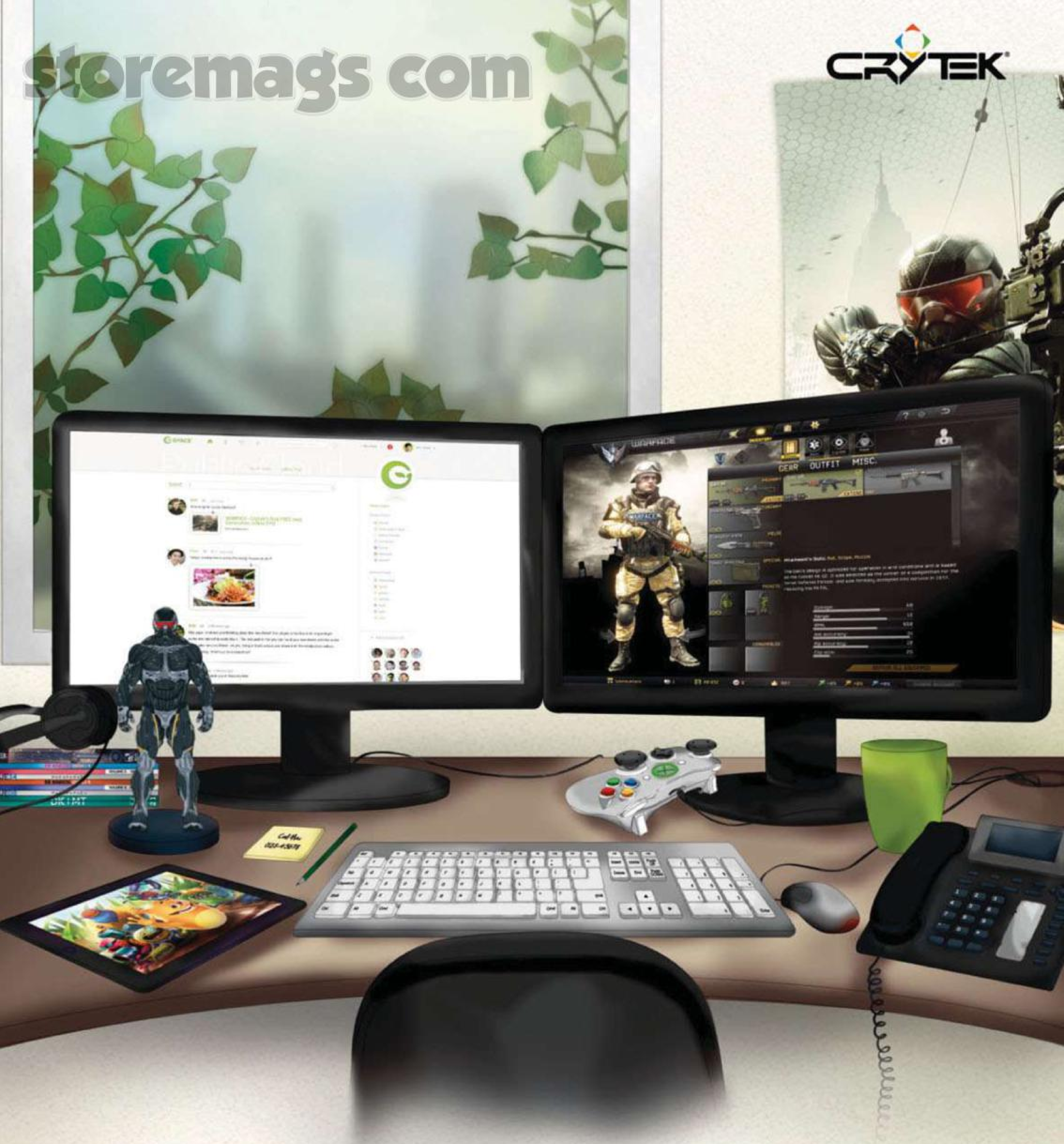
However, I find this shortsighted and idiotic. If you're Lady Gaga or Justin Bieber, then fine, protect every sale. If you're a brand new indie band? Let's think. You make a song and cast it into the ridiculously vast ocean of music circulating the Internet. By luck, it winds up playing for someone who might actually care, alongside dozens of competing songs. And now you're going to ask them to return to a specific site every time they want to listen? Increase the barrier for them to ever hear your track again? I've cast a lot of songs back into the ocean lately, in my capacities as a consumer and a hobbyist equally, because those songs risked being difficult at the crucial moment.

The currency these days isn't the 99 cents from selling a song, it's the attention of your potential customer. Streaming solutions are solving the wrong problem at the expense of the correct one. For customers today, the hard part is discovery, identifying the media you most want to pay for, and artists win by being sticky, not slippery. To succeed you need to give things away for free, begging people to take them. To make money, you sell something else. I'm happy to pay a lot more than 99 cents for albums and concerts of fantastic bands I've discovered via free singles. And if bands must have consistently good songwriting and/or a decent live performance to succeed in this economy, that sounds fair to me.

Unsurprisingly, this has been eye-opening when considering the similarities to my own media offerings. Tiger Style also distributes over the Internet in a market flooded with cheap content, a relatively new phenomenon in games. Again, the most pressing issue is discovery: getting a potential customer to rest their eyes for a moment on our product. However, we sell the digital equivalent of packaged goods you must buy without previewing. I hope Tiger Style offers the equivalent of a great album and a solid stage performance, but how do our customers know that? Do we frustrate them and sacrifice their fleeting attention by asking for money?

There's a set of solutions out there for games, including demos, free-to-play, and Flash versions, but all of these seem like they would require significant adaptation to be appropriate for Tiger Style. Really this is one small corner of a large, ongoing topic about how media consumption habits and markets are evolving with technology, and the expectations of the new generation that's sliding into the consumer driver's seat. What is the right new way to sell games?

Randy Smith is the co-owner of Tiger Style. He has also compiled his favourite songs into a mix: www.bit.ly/VgA56n


CRYTEK
WARFACE
GEAR
OUTFIT
MISC.

Word Play



JAMES LEACH

Game writing like a boss

The cake is a lie. Yes, you know what that's from: *Portal*. Incidentally, can you believe *Portal*'s nearly six years old? But anyway, "The cake is a lie" became a meme and was thus granted immortality, albeit in that fleeting Internetty way. I really wish that I'd written those five words.

And in a similar, er, vein, "I used to be an adventurer like you. Then I took an arrow in the knee." Which is from? Yep, *The Elder Scrolls V: Skyrim*. Now, this is a line very similar to many I've written for many swords-and-lords-type games. But, again, a meme and the writer now lives in a mansion with a computer-game-shaped swimming pool. Or so I like to believe.

When game writing muscles into the meme world, it says two things to me. Firstly, games are clearly universal enough to have earned their place there. To get memes, the people have to be au fait with where they come from. Secondly, the writing is confident enough not to seem too desperate. For, as we all know, cool doesn't try to be cool, and you can't really set out with the intention of writing a line that becomes effortlessly famous on the Internet. One does not simply walk into meme-ness.

The web is like a massive ant nest (bear with me here) and, of course, we are the ants. And like ants, we're far more alike than not. I know none of us wants to be seen as the same as anyone else, but really we are. We think alike, we enjoy things alike and, damn it, we take great pleasure in doing so, because it reinforces the impression that we're fine and as good as everyone else, and that we fit in, and we're part of a group. Honestly, it's true, even if you don't want it to be. You know that kinship you feel when you stumble onto something just as, or fractionally after, other clever people do? Yes, you'd be part of a cool elite for getting it and getting it first, but you're alone. The other cool dudes validate you and your judgement. Being alone creates self-doubt.

Even though a tsunami of information and entertainment crashes towards us all the time, it's amazing how much we seem to share our experiences globally. Liam Neeson's 'unique set of skills' schtick in Taken, the *Skyrim* and *Portal* lines, Totally Looks Like, rage comics and so on. It's part



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of what I know, and I dare say the same for you. And as I write game dialogue and text, there is, I cannot deny, a part of me that hopes certain lines, ideas or interchanges will hit the meme jackpot. There's a great joy in knowing something you've come up with has lodged in people's heads. It proves you've done it right.

Bruce Robinson once said that when he was filming Withnail & I, there was a moment when the crew, who hadn't given much away regarding their opinions of the movie till this point, all latched on with delight to Uncle Monty's line, "As a youth I used to weep in butchers' shops." When he heard them (over)using it to each other, he relaxed and for the first time started to believe the film would be a hit.

So as this deluge of digital stuff washes over us all, it is odd that we find ourselves sharing bits. Although notice that what we share are bits – almost literally bits. Tiny fragments. "War. War never changes", "Finish him!", "Someone set us up the bomb", "You must construct additional pylons." It's a shorthand. I quote one line. If you know it, we both know the game, or whatever. Plus the line I choose makes a point in a way that's far better than just saying it. If you know what I mean. Go on, think about it. I can wait. (Thorin sits down and starts singing about gold.)

Games are a big deal in all this because the net-savviest people tend to play games. Also, most of the quotable, out-of-context memes come from entertainment you invest a little more in than, say, just simple TV or pop songs. Movies and games resonate more with us because they're bigger, more engaging emotional events and we largely tend to feel the same way as we experience them.

As more and more games get this niche acceptance, the happier I am. As an industry, we've had an inferiority complex, off and on, for a long time. Truly, I believe that's gone now, and that we have realised that giant, epic, story-driven games are not competing with movies, and that little app-style games aren't lacking if they're not pretending to be giant, epic, story-driven games.

Note how game-based memes are never the full-on declaimed Brian Blessed-like classic lines, though. It's the quirky ones people share. The ones that make a comment on whatever the issue is that's currently under discussion. The psychology behind using obscure but vaguely applicable quotes to promote kinship and humour in a discussion is perhaps a different subject altogether. "Our princess is in another castle!"

So in my quest to get a line into the world of memes, I can only do the following. First, keep them short. "None shall pass." Make them highly applicable. "Hadouken." Ideally, make them odd, so those not au fait with the source will have no idea what you're talking about. "You have died of dysentery." But make sure the people who do instantly know where they're from and what I'm trying to say. "Wakka wakka wakka."

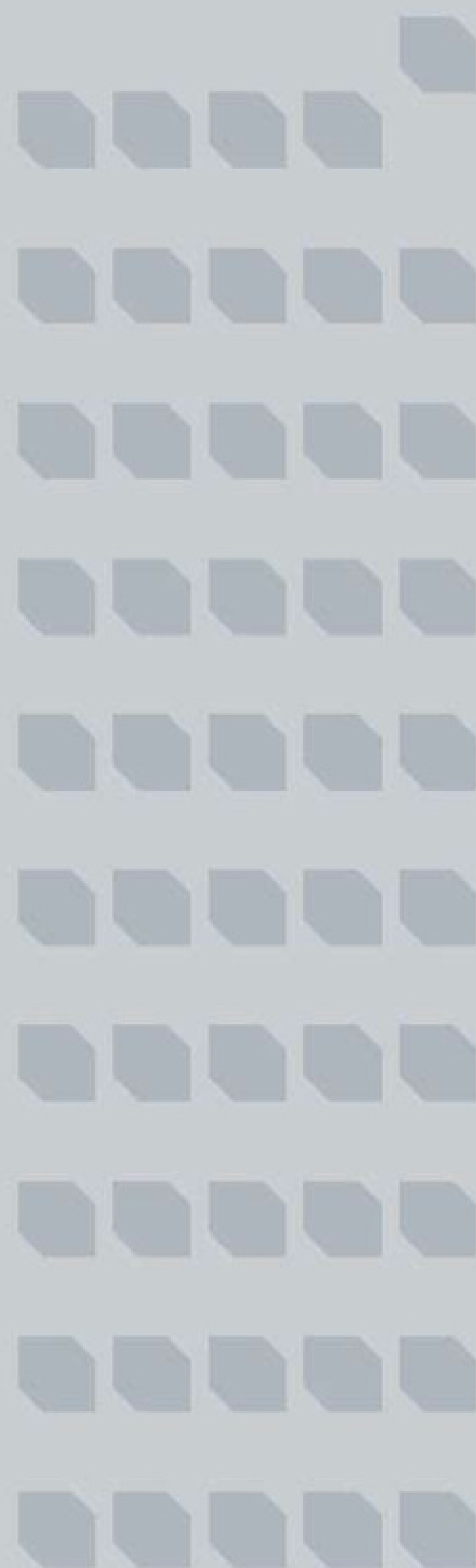
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